

Enhancing Early Childhood Vocabulary Development through Paper-Book-Based Storytelling in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines the role of paper-book-based storytelling in supporting teachers' teaching of English vocabulary to early childhood learners. The research focuses on the classroom implementation of storytelling activities, participants' perceptions, and the pedagogical effects on young learners' language development. The study was conducted in a kindergarten setting with one English teacher and eleven five-year-old students. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, data collection involved in-class observations along with semi-structured teacher interviews, and documentation of instructional activities and students' learning products. The data collected were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to instructional practices, learner responses, and learning outcomes. Through repeated exposure to vocabulary embedded in meaningful narrative contexts, children demonstrated improved understanding of word meanings and extensive confidence in using new vocabulary during classroom interactions. The use of interactive and multimodal storytelling techniques such as gestures, visual illustrations, questioning, and student participation was found to sustain learners' attention and promote active engagement. In addition, the study highlights the teacher's intentional instructional strategies in selecting age-appropriate stories, scaffolding vocabulary learning, and encouraging student participation. While the approach was perceived as beneficial, the study also identifies practical challenges, including limited instructional time and the need for teacher creativity in managing classroom dynamics. The findings indicate that paper-book-based storytelling is an engaging, reachable, and culturally meaningful method for teaching vocabulary in early childhood education.

Keywords: Early Childhood; EFL Classrooms; Paper-Book-Based Storytelling; Student's Engagement; and Vocabulary Development

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji peran mendukung menggunakan buku dongeng cetak dalam mendukung pengajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris oleh guru kepada peserta didik usia dini. Penelitian ini berfokus pada penerapan kegiatan mendukung di kelas, persepsi para partisipan, serta dampak pedagogis terhadap perkembangan bahasa anak usia dini. Studi ini dilaksanakan di lingkungan taman kanak-kanak yang melibatkan seorang guru bahasa Inggris dan sebelas siswa berusia lima tahun. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian deskriptif kualitatif, pengumpulan data mencakup observasi di kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan guru, serta dokumentasi kegiatan pembelajaran dan hasil karya siswa. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis secara tematis untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola berulang terkait praktik pengajaran, respons peserta didik, dan hasil pembelajaran. Melalui paparan berulang

terhadap kosakata yang disajikan dalam konteks naratif yang bermakna, anak-anak menunjukkan peningkatan pemahaman akan makna kata serta kepercayaan diri yang tinggi dalam menggunakan kosakata baru selama interaksi di kelas. Penggunaan teknik mendongeng yang interaktif dan multimodal, seperti penggunaan gestur, ilustrasi visual, pemberian pertanyaan, dan pelibatan siswa, terbukti mampu mempertahankan perhatian peserta didik dan mendorong keterlibatan aktif. Selain itu, studi ini menyoroti strategi pengajaran yang terencana dari guru dalam memilih cerita yang sesuai dengan usia anak, memberikan scaffolding dalam pembelajaran kosakata, serta mendorong partisipasi siswa. Meskipun pendekatan ini terbukti bermanfaat secara pedagogis, studi ini juga mengidentifikasi tantangan praktis, termasuk keterbatasan waktu pembelajaran dan perlunya kreativitas guru dalam mengelola dinamika kelas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mendongeng menggunakan buku cetak merupakan metode yang menarik, mudah diterapkan, dan bermakna secara budaya untuk mengajarkan kosakata dalam pendidikan anak usia dini.

Kata kunci: Anak Usia Dini; Kelas EFL; Bercerita Menggunakan Buku Cetak; Keterlibatan Siswa; dan Pengembangan Kosakata

Pendahuluan

Vocabulary development is a main component of early language and literacy, communication skills of children, reading proficiency, and overall school achievement. Language develops rapidly in early childhood through multiple exposures to words and stories in everyday existence (Mangold et al., 2025). With a richer vocabulary, children are enabled to express their thoughts, comprehend texts, and develop the cognitive scaffolding that supports further literacy development (Neuman & Kaefer, 2025). Therefore, effective vocabulary learning in early childhood needs to go beyond rote memorization, leveraging instructional contexts with intended meaning that foster deep language knowledge. Despite its importance, most early childhood classrooms in developing countries still rely heavily on rote learning techniques that emphasize mechanical repetition and lack contextual meaning, yielding limited benefits (Ganesan et al., 2025). These practices are not likely to capture the interest and imagination of children, with minimal word retention and passive class participation (Uyun et al., 2023).

There is an emerging need for alternative and contextually relevant pedagogical practices that are sensitive to young children's linguistic, cognitive, and affective demands. The storytelling learning style can be used to assist students with

vocabulary growth and promote language development (Ilahi et al., 2024). As it happens, storytelling has already been greatly recognized as an essential and effective medium for early childhood vocabulary enrichment. In storytelling, kids get exposed to new vocabulary in dense contextual environments with visual images, change in tone and pitch, and feeling involvement (Surya & Aprilia, 2024). Students learn new vocabulary through storytelling, and storytelling can be an effective and suitable strategy for young EFL learners. Teachers can use storytelling for young learners to maintain their EFL vocabulary learning (Centeno et al., 2021; Baiomy, 2024). Storytelling with children is seen as a good teaching approach and a study showed it improves vocabulary learning in preschoolers (Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021).

In addition to vocabulary development, storytelling also facilitates the development of listening comprehension, empathy, and ethical knowledge as a natural learning process, rather than a language process (Bunayyah et al., 2025). The development of technology in learning has positioned digital storytelling at the forefront as a modern learning resource. Nevertheless, excessive reliance on digital technology has been observed to lead to distrust in the teacher-student interaction, potentially discrediting emotional connection and hindering thorough comprehension (Shi & Cheung, 2024). Digital storytelling might seem to provide ease and visual appeal, but it is likely to lack the sensory richness and dialogic engagement found in traditional storytelling through written texts (Guedes Teixeira et al., 2025).

On the other hand, storying through printed picture books, or paper-book-based storying, offers a multisensory learning experience that facilitates linguistic and emotional development. Physical books stimulate children's senses through touch interaction in terms of page-turning and visual examination while facilitating joint attention between teacher and child (Sasikirana et al., 2025). The sensory experiences anchor memory, comprehension, and actual passion for reading. Besides, learning using physical books enables teachers to personalize learning through varied expressive voice, body language, and facial expressions highlighting

point-of- emphasis vocabulary, hence providing a warm and stimulating learning atmosphere (Rzayeva, 2025). Although much research confirms the pedagogical benefit of applying story to language learning, recent research has given most attention to multimedia and online narrative with limited space for considering paper-book-based narrative in terms of vocabulary teaching (Wang & Su, 2025). The limitation is particularly pronounced in non-digital learning environments where technology availability is still limited but narrative cultures are still vibrant.

In Indonesia and other developing countries, the availability of storybooks in early learning is still low, driven primarily by the perception that digital media are inherently superior (Shi & Cheung, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that traditional storytelling with engrossing picture books has a notable impact on vocabulary learning and comprehension among children and usually trumps screen-based learning (Sirjon et al., 2025). Reading illustrated story books help children understand the story through appealing visuals. Storytelling led to positive language development, children showed improved fluency in speaking, clearer expression of ideas and expanded vocabulary (Fadhillah & Purnamasari, 2025). Such research underscores the importance of reexamining traditional storytelling practices as effective and functional language teaching aids (Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021; Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024).

Responding to such issues, this present study aims to encourage the effectiveness of the use of storytelling using paper-book-based materials in enhancing the vocabulary of early childhood students. By exploring the role of storytelling in language acquisition, this study aims to viaduct the gap between literacy education needs of the modern world and traditional teaching practices. The suggested approach focuses not only on language development but also actually aims at the establishment of emotional connections and social interaction between teachers and children.

This research enriches the larger discussion of narrative-based learning and multimodal literacy in early education. In practice, it presents the teachers with a cost-effective, interactive, and human-centered approach to the enhancement of

vocabulary teaching through printed storybooks. Finally, this study highlights the lasting strength of concrete, effectively engaging storytelling in developing young children's linguistic capital, creativity, and cognitive development. The research questions guiding this study are: How is storytelling paper-book-based, implemented in teaching vocabulary to early childhood students? What are the teachers' and students' perceptions of using paper-book-based storytelling in vocabulary learning? How does storytelling based on paper books influence children's vocabulary acquisition? These questions serve as the foundation for investigation, not only the implementation of storytelling in students' vocabulary enhancement, but also the perspective of classroom participants.

Research Methods

Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive design to examine and describe how paper-based books facilitate storytelling, which in turn helps build vocabulary among early children. Qualitative design was used for intensive examination of participants' experiences, behaviors, and interactions in authentic classroom settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research emphasizes building up an understanding of meaning, interpretation, and teaching and learning dynamics in the context of storytelling, since it aims to explore how and why storytelling contributes vocabulary learning for early childhood students under natural classroom conditions. This strategy enables the researchers to observe actual interaction, involvement, and application of languages in the process of narrating in order to get a very rich understanding of the learning process. The target was a Kindergarten school in an area in Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia. This location was chosen because the paper-based storytelling program continues to be conducted each week according to a predetermined schedule. This descriptive method was deemed appropriate for this study since it obtains actual pedagogical practices, unplanned interactions, and learners' responses to storytelling using printed media (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Site and Participants

The study involved a class teacher and eleven kindergarten children, averaging five years old, from a group of Class A, participating in a storytelling activity. Purposive sampling was the method employed as a sampling technique, which is used most often in qualitative research to obtain participants who are selected according to specific parameters regarding the area of research (Palinkas et al., 2015). The teacher was chosen based on her minimum three years of teaching experience in early child education and prior experience in literacy or storybook instruction. The children were chosen since they represent a significant developmental phase for learning vocabulary.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three major data collection methods were used: observation, interview, and documentation. Class observations were carried out to record how storytelling was being practiced, for example, during teaching, interactions, and children's verbal engagement. Semi structured teacher interviews asked questions on instructional strategies, challenges, and perceptions of the storytelling process. Documentation, for example, story book used, students' vocabulary lists, and field notes, was used to support data triangulation. The main class activities of storytelling were saved on video recording. The framework by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) consists of condensing data, displaying it, and drawing conclusions, was used to analyze the data. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed using the interactive framework, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Through this systematic analysis, three major themes emerged: (1) pedagogical intentionality and learner engagement, (2) cognitive and linguistic development, and (3) practical challenges and media adaptation. The following analysis technique ensured credibility and consistency of findings through cross-checking of sources of data. The qualitative analysis of this research showed a better insight into the use of paper-book-based narration in vocabulary building of young learners.

Analysis

Findings

This qualitative study reveals that paper-based storytelling plays a significant role in fostering vocabulary development and language comprehension among early childhood learners. Through structured and interactive narration activities, children were exposed to repeated lexical input, contextualized meanings, and visual representations embedded in printed storybooks. These elements collectively contributed to enhanced vocabulary acquisition, improved word recall, and deeper comprehension of narrative content.

This section concludes the findings gathered from the classroom storytelling session “*Sayur Capcay Enak*” (Capcay is delicious) observed and recorded in kindergarten. The transcript is authentic classroom conversation between a teacher and a group of kindergarten children during a storytelling session using a printed picture book. The principal concern of the observation was how paper-based storytelling assists young children in vocabulary and conceptual development by engaging multiple modalities listening, verbal response, and visual interpretation.

Data were thematically coded and analyzed, naming linguistic input, learner involvement, and observable action in vocabulary learning. The storytelling exercise lasted approximately 10 minutes. The story came from a book in printed form called “*Sayur Capcay*” (Mixed Vegetables). In the activity, the teacher showed 13 key vocabulary words regarding vegetables and food: *Sayur*/Vegetable, *Wortel*/Carrot, *Brokoli*/Broccoli, *Caisim*/Choy Sum, *Pakcoy*/Pak Choy, *Buncis*/Beans, *Jamur*/Mushroom, *Cumi*/Squid, *Ceker*/Claw, *Cabe*/Chilli, *Tauco*./Tauchu, *Merica/Lada*/ Pepper, *Kecap*/ Soy sauce.

Table 1. Sample Coding of Storytelling Interaction

Linguistic Focus	Teacher Action	Student Response	Vocabulary Acquisition Behavior
Word Introduction	“Ada sayuran hijau yang segar. Cesim namanya.” / “There are fresh green vegetables. Their name is cesim.”	“Cesim”	Word repetition and labeling

Concept Reinforcement	"Ada jamur kancing kesukaan ayah." / "There are button mushrooms that Dad likes."	"Jamur"	Word recall and recognition
Comprehension Check	"Tau gak merica?" / "Do you know pepper?"	"Tau"	Confirmation of word meaning
Semantic Connection	"Sayur juga sehat. Kalo kamu suka sayur tidak?" / Vegetables are also healthy. Do you like vegetables?	"Tidak..."	Personal association and contrastive understanding
Vocabulary Expansion	"Masukkan semua bahan ke dalam wajan. Namanya bumbu tauco." / Put all the ingredients into the pan. It's called tauco seasoning.	"Kecap, Tauco"	Partial recall, associative learning
Narrative Recall	"Apa makanan yang ibu masak?" / "What food is mom cooking?"	"Capcay"	Story-level comprehension and recall

The student-teacher interaction demonstrated active call-and-response behaviors, repetition, and affective participation—key features of effective vocabulary learning based on stories (Cameron, 2001; Nurhillal et al., 2025). This study examined the effectiveness of using paper-book based storytelling to teach vocabulary to early childhood students. The qualitative findings from interviews and classroom observations, indicated that storytelling with a paper book effectively supports vocabulary development in early childhood.

Multiple exposures to words were associated with improved word recall. Using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) thematic analysis, the first theme is pedagogical intentionality and engagement, highlighted the teacher's understanding of storytelling as a strategic tool for attention management and language enrichment. The first theme, pedagogical intentionality and learner engagement, reveals that the teacher employed storytelling deliberately as a pedagogical strategy rather than as a supplementary or recreational activity. The teacher demonstrated clear instructional intentions in selecting age-appropriate printed storybooks, planning vocabulary-focused storytelling sessions, and designing interactional prompts to maintain children's attention. Classroom observations showed that the

teacher actively used illustrations, gestures, and questioning techniques to guide learners' focus and encourage verbal responses. The printed storybooks functioned as a shared visual reference that facilitated joint attention and dialogic interaction. Children were observed pointing to pictures, repeating key words, and responding enthusiastically to teacher prompts. The teacher observed that printed storybooks sustain children's motivation through visual interaction and responsive dialogue.

The second theme, cognitive and linguistic development, indicates that paper-book-based storytelling supported children's vocabulary comprehension, retention, and expressive language use. The teacher observed quite noticeable enhancements in word memory of students and contextual usage. During storytelling sessions, children demonstrated increasing familiarity with target words by naming objects depicted in the illustrations and attempting to use the words in simple utterances. Students' attempts at retelling with routine blending of Indonesian and Sundanese reflected active linguistic experimenting, a natural process of bilingual acquisition (Navarro, 2025). This code-mixing reflected active linguistic experimentation and emerging bilingual competence rather than confusion. Additionally, the physicality of holding books and discussing using pictures enabled multimodal learning. Overall, the findings suggest that storytelling provided a rich, contextualized learning environment that promoted deeper cognitive processing of vocabulary.

The third theme is practical challenges and media adaptation, highlights contextual constraints encountered in implementing storytelling activities, which revealed constraints such as limited space, noise, and variety of media. Despite these limitations, the teacher demonstrated adaptability by modifying storytelling techniques, such as incorporating puppets or varying interaction patterns, to maintain learner interest. The teacher's belief that "books are timeless media" testified to the cultural and educational significance of print literacy, that in terms of developing vocabulary, comprehension, and emotional connection in ways that cannot be completely substituted with digital media.

Discussion

Early childhood vocabulary acquisition is linguistic and social as children learn vocabulary from communication, feeling, and storytelling. Storytelling, particularly from printed picture books, contextualizes vocabulary, supporting greater understanding and long-term memory (Zhu, Chau, El-Tahawy, & Roe, 2025). The theory underlying story-based vocabulary acquisition lies in constructivist and sociocultural theories. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development posits that language acquisition occurs through collaborative social interaction. Storytelling allows teachers to make understanding possible within real-life linguistic contexts, and paper books support multisensory engagement or visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (Navarro, 2025). This aligns with dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986), which posits that integrating verbal and visual inputs, such as images, enhances memory and understanding (Rubinic, 2025).

Through visual comprehension of printed books, interactive narrating, reiteration, children portrayed active engagement, accurate word recall, and reasonable relations between language and real contexts. These findings support previous studies (Cameron, 2001; Nurhillal et al., 2025) pointing toward the merits of contextual, narrative input while emphasizing ongoing relevance of traditional print media for developing attention, imagination, and cultural awareness. This study also supports the argument of (Mansoor et al., 2023), a picture is an effective tool for mnemonic words. Almost all students acquire the short story and memorize the new words better. The short story made memorizing the words easy for students, so short stories can be used for teaching the English language for specific purposes courses. The words used in daily life will be easy to recall and tangible. The use of locally themed stories also facilitated greater emotional engagement and sense of belonging among the children. These elements collectively contributed to enhanced vocabulary acquisition, improved word recall, and deeper comprehension of narrative content. The results demonstrate that young learners actively engaged with the storytelling sessions by responding to questions, repeating target vocabulary, and relating story events to their own lived experiences. Such

engagement reflects the effectiveness of print-based storytelling in supporting both receptive and expressive language development during early childhood.

Storytelling demonstrated improvements in children's narrative skills and vocabulary acquisition. Children who participated in storytelling showed a marked increase in their ability to recall story elements and construct coherent narratives (Surya & Aprilia, 2024). Nurmahanani (2025) found that dialogic reading, where teachers actively involve children through questioning, prompting, and shared storytelling significantly improves vocabulary comprehension and narrative competence. Similarly, Niasari and Budiarti (2025) reported that the use of large illustrated books enhanced children's vocabulary acquisition and storytelling abilities by providing clear visual cues and opportunities for interaction. Storytelling sessions encourage children to use language actively, internalise sentence patterns, and experiment with expressive and emotive vocabulary (Nurhillal, Utami, & Valentin, 2025). Interactive narration emerged as a crucial pedagogical strategy in this study. The teacher's use of questioning, prompting, repetition, and expressive intonation encouraged children to focus their attention and process new vocabulary meaningfully. Reiteration of key words and phrases across storytelling sessions strengthened memory retention and supported accurate word recall. Visual cues from illustrations further reinforced comprehension by enabling children to associate words with concrete images and familiar objects.

Printed picture books also provide cognitive and emotional advantages over digital media. Storytelling enables haptic interaction and focused attention, facilitating deeper linguistic processing in preschoolers (Anggraeni, F., & Pratiwi, R. 2023). Multimodal cues that words, images, and voice strengthen semantic mapping and support children in mapping words to conceptual sense (Lindahl Wise, 2025). Such multimodal interactions develop phonological awareness and early reading skills. Whereas digital storytelling can promote participation, paper storytelling is responsive to joint attention and emotional engagement, key factors in vocabulary acquisition (Bus et al., 2026; Ugurlu, 2025). Research by Alkilani & Zhang (2025) shows that storybooks with colorful pictures, captivating illustrations,

quality paper, and quality printing are more likely to engage children in code-related aspects of emergent literacy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These aspects include letter recognition, letter writing, and name writing. In contrast, elements such as dramatization (including the use of voice, facial expression, and exaggeration), storytelling and retelling, as well as story acting, are more effective in enhancing a child's oral English skills. These interactions also contribute to the development of phonological awareness and early reading skills, which are essential components of early literacy development (Ahmadil & Zubaidillah, 2025).

The present study integrates constructivist, sociocultural, and multimodal theories to explain how paper-based picture book storytelling facilitates vocabulary acquisition in early childhood. Story-based instruction provides rich, contextualized language input that supports linguistic development, imagination, cognitive growth and empathy. Through storytelling, children learn vocabulary embedded in meaningful narratives rather than isolated word lists, allowing them to develop deeper semantic understanding and communicative competence. Despite the increasing availability of digital learning tools (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017; Liang & Zhang, 2025), paper-based storytelling remains an effective, accessible, and culturally appropriate pedagogical approach for fostering early literacy and vocabulary development among young children (Ahmadil & Zubaidillah, 2025; Rubinic, 2025). Bus et al. (2026) and Ugurlu (2025) argue that printed books are more conducive to joint attention, emotional bonding, and responsive interaction—key factors in early vocabulary development. Digital formats, although interactive, may distract learners or reduce opportunities for sustained dialogue if not carefully mediated. In contrast, paper-based storytelling naturally supports turn-taking, eye contact, and conversational exchanges, all of which are essential for language socialization.

Another significant finding of the study relates to the use of locally themed stories. One of the benefits of storytelling to children is enriching the vocabulary of children (Rahman, 2017). Stories reflecting familiar cultural settings, characters, and daily experiences elicited stronger emotional responses and a sense of

belonging among the children. This cultural relevance appeared to enhance motivation and engagement, as children were more eager to participate and relate story events to their own environments. The use of local culture-based picture storybooks is important because it can enhance young learners' reading skill, create enjoyable learning, and build young learners' English literacy, as well as preserve local culture (Ratminingsih & Budasi, 2018). Such findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive materials in early childhood education, as they not only facilitate language learning but also contribute to identity formation and socio-emotional development.

Conclusion

The study concludes that instruction in vocabulary through written text-based narrative is a very worthy method of encouraging vocabulary growth among young children. By providing frequent reinforcement of novel words and encouraging active interaction with interactive storytelling workshops, children not only progress receptive vocabulary with the understanding of word meanings, but also build their expressing ability by using new words in context. The study highlights the manner theme stories capture children's imagination, arouse interest, and inspire meaningful engagement with words to enable learners to link words to experience and pictures in the books. Culturally and socially, stories children are familiar with or can connect to everyday life make it easy to comprehend and keep learners interested, as well as enable cultural learning and identity. In practice, the study demonstrates how books in print are able to involve more than a single sense and learning mode, since children respond aloud, read pictures, and handle books, creating a richer multimodal learning environment. Pedagogical capabilities inherent in paper-based narrative are shown through the study while conveying challenges such as limited class space, distraction, and the need for creative adaptation of teaching material to retain interest. Given the study's small scale and single-classroom context, further study should examine broader classroom settings, temporal vocabulary retention, and comparison with digitally-based narrative

models to better elucidate the entire range and long-term viability of story-based approaches to early childhood education.

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