

EFL Learners' Perception in Using Picture Series-Based Storytelling to Develop Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: In many EFL contexts, students struggle to develop adequate reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary and an over-reliance on teacher-centered instructional methods. This study aims to examine how EFL learners perceive picture series-based storytelling in developing reading comprehension and to identify the contextual difficulties students face when using this strategy. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, empirical data were collected from 16 eighth-grade students at MTs NWDI Loyok through a Likert-scale questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and participatory classroom observation. The findings reveal that students hold predominantly positive perceptions of the strategy, reporting stronger motivation, greater confidence, and higher engagement when reading is scaffolded by visual and narrative support. However, students also encountered distinct psychological, linguistic, and contextual difficulties, specifically foreign language anxiety when retelling stories, struggles with limited vocabulary, and a loss of concentration due to classroom noise. The study concludes that picture series-based storytelling is a highly useful and motivating strategy for EFL reading comprehension in rural schools, provided that teachers proactively support students with vocabulary preparation and structured classroom management.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Picture Series, Reading Comprehension, Storytelling, Students' Perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

English is widely recognized as the primary medium of international communication and academic discourse. In many EFL contexts, however, students struggle to develop adequate reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary, restricted background knowledge, and an over-reliance on teacher-centered instructional methods (Ali & Razali, 2022; Shewangizaw, 2024). These challenges are particularly acute in rural Indonesian schools, where access to diverse reading resources is constrained and English is encountered almost exclusively within formal classroom settings.

Visual media have emerged as a promising intervention. Picture series—sequential arrangements of related images that depict narrative events—provide contextual scaffolding that supports prediction, sequence comprehension, and main-idea identification in EFL reading (Guo, 2020; Mundhiyanti et al., 2023). When combined with storytelling, picture series create a multimodal learning experience that simultaneously engages cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning and Paivio's (1986) dual coding

theory both suggest that integrating visual and verbal information channels deepens comprehension and retention.

Recent empirical work has affirmed the value of this approach. Hidayat, Sundari, and Zuhairi (2024) found that digital storytelling combined with multimodal digital literacy significantly enhanced EFL reading comprehension. Liza Hidayati and Ira Maisarah (2025) reported consistently positive student perceptions toward digital storytelling in narrative reading instruction. Pratama (2025) demonstrated similar reading comprehension gains through picture storybooks. Despite this growing evidence base, most studies focus on performance outcomes and pay insufficient attention to students' subjective perceptions of the strategy in use.

Students' perceptions are not peripheral to learning outcomes; they shape them. Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis holds that low anxiety and high motivation are necessary conditions for successful second language acquisition. MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) have

established that affective variables—confidence, anxiety, and willingness to communicate—profoundly shape learners’ engagement. Understanding students’ perceptions is therefore essential for designing reading strategies that are effective and sustainable.

This study addressed this gap by investigating how Grade VIII EFL learners at a rural Islamic junior secondary school in East Lombok, Indonesia, perceived and experienced picture series-based storytelling. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What are EFL learners’ perceptions toward the use of picture series-based storytelling in developing reading comprehension? and (2) What difficulties do EFL learners encounter when using picture series-based storytelling in reading comprehension activities?

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design (Creswell, 2014) supplemented by quantitative questionnaire data to explore students’ perceptions, experiences, and difficulties in a naturalistic classroom setting rather than to purely measure performance outcomes (Doyle et al., 2020; Bingham, 2023). Regarding the time and location of the research, the study was conducted at MTs NWDI Loyok, an Islamic junior secondary school in Loyok Village, Sikur District, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The school represents a typical rural EFL profile: English is taught as a foreign language with limited weekly contact hours, instructional resources are constrained, and students’ daily language is Sasak rather than Indonesian or English.

The population and sample of this study were meticulously selected to capture the target demographic. Specifically, the participants were 16

eighth-grade students who were selected through total sampling.

The research procedure involved systematic data collection within a single session during a picture series-based storytelling reading comprehension lesson. Data were gathered through three primary instruments: (1) a nine-item four-point Likert-scale questionnaire covering perceptions and engagement (Dimension A: 4 items) and difficulties (Dimension C: 5 items); (2) semi-structured interviews with 12 open-ended questions conducted individually with all 16 students; and (3) participatory classroom observation.

Finally, the data analysis technique was interactively conducted. Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed by computing mean scores per item and per dimension, while qualitative data were analyzed following the cyclical model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020). This process involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Trustworthiness was robustly established through method triangulation, source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Hamilton, 2020; Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Perceptions of Picture Series-Based Storytelling

The questionnaire data indicate that students held predominantly positive perceptions of picture series-based storytelling. Table 1 presents the response distribution and mean scores for all nine questionnaire items.

Table 1. Questionnaire Response Distribution: Student Perceptions and Difficulties (n=16)							
No.	Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean	Category
A.1	I feel happy and motivated to read English texts when the teacher uses picture series	5	11	0	0	3.31	Positive
A.2	Picture series makes reading lessons more engaging compared to reading only from the textbook	3	13	0	0	3.19	Positive
A.3	Storytelling activities make me more confident to participate in the lesson	5	8	3	0	3.13	Positive
A.4	I enjoy predicting the story content through pictures before reading the text	2	13	1	0	3.06	Positive
C.1	I still find it difficult to understand English texts even with the help of picture series	2	10	3	1	2.81	Positive
C.2	I find it hard to connect the pictures with the content of the English text being read	1	6	6	3	2.31	Negative

No.	Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean	Category
C.3	I feel nervous or confused when asked to retell a story in English	4	7	4	1	2.88	Positive
C.4	I have difficulty finding the right English vocabulary when explaining picture content	3	8	5	0	2.88	Positive
C.5	I find it difficult to predict the storyline based on picture series alone	1	4	7	4	2.13	Negative

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

Table 2. Summary of Mean Scores by Questionnaire Dimension

Dimension	Aspect Measured	Mean Score	Category
A	Student Perceptions and Engagement	3.17	Positive
C	Difficulties Encountered by Students	2.60	Moderate

Dimension A, measuring students’ perceptions and engagement, reached a mean of 3.17 (Positive) on a 4.00 Likert scale. The highest mean was recorded for item A.1 (M=3.31), indicating that students felt happy and motivated when engaging with picture series-supported reading activities. Item A.2 (M= 3.19) confirmed that students viewed the visual strategy as more engaging than conventional textbook-based reading. These findings align with Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, which posits that appropriately scaffolded tasks enable learners to perform beyond their independent competence, with the picture series functioning as a mediational tool that lowered the cognitive barriers to text comprehension.

Difficulties Encountered by Students

Table 2 summarizes mean scores by dimension. Dimension C—measuring difficulties—reached a moderate mean of 2.60, indicating that difficulties were real but not overwhelming. Three categories of difficulty emerged from both the questionnaire and interview data.

The first difficulty was psychological. Item C.3 (“I feel nervous or confused when asked to retell a story in English,” M= 2.88) reflected the pervasive nature of foreign language anxiety in oral production tasks. This aligns with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) and MacIntyre et al. (1998), who identified speaking anxiety as a primary barrier to EFL communication. Marlia et al. (2023) similarly found that anxiety during storytelling was the dominant difficulty among Indonesian EFL students. Interview responses confirmed this pattern, with multiple students describing self-consciousness about pronunciation and grammatical accuracy.

The second difficulty was linguistic. Limited vocabulary, evident in item C.4 (M=2.88) and prominent throughout interviews, constrained both

text comprehension and oral narrative production. This is consistent with Fathurizki et al. (2025), Lutfiyah et al. (2022), and Muhassin (2021), who confirmed that vocabulary limitation is one of the most persistent barriers in Indonesian EFL contexts. Item C.2 (M=2.31) further suggests that not all students can seamlessly bridge pictorial and textual comprehension without explicit support.

The third difficulty was contextual. Classroom noise, raised by multiple students in interviews, disrupted concentration during the activity. Because storytelling is inherently interactive and participatory, it can generate elevated noise levels that disturb learners who require a quieter environment for language processing. This finding underscores the importance of structured classroom management protocols in the implementation of communicative reading strategies (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023).

Discussion

Krashen’s (1985) affective filter hypothesis provides further theoretical grounding: low anxiety and high motivation facilitate second language input processing. The high motivation ratings suggest that picture series-based storytelling created affectively supportive conditions. Paivio’s (1986) dual coding theory and Mayer’s (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning further explain how the simultaneous engagement of visual and verbal information channels deepens comprehension and retention. Interview data corroborated these findings: students consistently reported that the visual scaffolding helped them construct

meaning more easily and that the narrative structure helped them organize information from English texts more coherently.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated EFL learners' perceptions of and difficulties with picture series-based storytelling as a reading comprehension strategy at MTs NWDI Loyok, East Lombok. Two key findings emerged. First, students held predominantly positive perceptions, as reflected in a Dimension A mean of 3.17 (Positive), with reading motivation receiving the highest rating ($M = 3.31$). Students reported that visual scaffolding enhanced text comprehension, prediction ability, and learning engagement—findings grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory, and Mayer's (2009) multimedia learning theory.

Second, students encountered three categories of difficulty: psychological (speaking anxiety, $M = 2.88$), linguistic (limited vocabulary, $M = 2.88$), and contextual (classroom noise), with Dimension C reaching a moderate mean of 2.60. Teachers are encouraged to integrate vocabulary pre-teaching, anxiety-reducing warm-up activities, and structured classroom management protocols to maximize the strategy's effectiveness. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs with larger, more diverse samples to examine the development of both student perceptions and measurable reading comprehension outcomes across multiple instructional sessions.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Research Questionnaire Instrument

The questionnaire used nine items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree). Dimension A (4 items) measured student perceptions and engagement; Dimension C (5 items) measured difficulties encountered during the activity.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Summary)

12 open-ended questions were used across four thematic areas: (1) general perceptions of the learning activity, (2) reading comprehension through picture series, (3) difficulties faced, and (4) suggestions and recommendations. All interviews were conducted individually in Indonesian and interpreted into English.