Research Article

"Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Children's Picture books"

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Abstract

This study explores reading comprehension, a key component of language and literacy education, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. While numerous programs aim to strengthen comprehension skills, instructional approaches vary considerably, and in some cases, this essential area receives limited attention. The research investigated the perspectives of Iranian EFL teachers and students on the use of children's picture books as a means to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies. The participants included two English teachers and forty seventh- and eighth-grade students from urban schools in Arak City, Iran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, surveys, and analysis of classroom documents. Findings indicated that students responded positively to strategy instruction using picture books. Teachers observed that picture books supported students' understanding of texts, and students successfully applied a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when engaging with both picture books and textbook passages. Furthermore, students' preferred picture books often aligned with their favored reading strategies. Despite concerns regarding limited class time and vocabulary instruction challenges, the study underscores the value of integrating picture books into EFL reading instruction. It provides meaningful insights into comprehension practices in Iranian classrooms and contributes to broader discussions in the field.

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Introduction

Reading comprehension is a core element of language and literacy development. Experts emphasize its centrality, calling it "the essence," "heart," and "driving force" of reading (Durkin, 1993; Moore & Hall, 2012; Leu et al., 2007). It plays a vital role in first and second language learning and contributes significantly to writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking development (Alkhawaldeh, 2011; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Fahim, Barjesteh, & Vaseghi, 2012; Kouri & Telander, 2008; Snow, 2002). Moreover, it is foundational to the effectiveness of language programs (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002; Hock & Mellard, 2005).

However, defining reading comprehension remains a challenge due to its complex and multidimensional nature. It involves cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic, and behavioral elements (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2000; Cohen, 1998; Flood, Lapp, & Fisher, 2003). Definitions vary: Bormuth (1969) described it as acquiring and demonstrating information from text, while Kirmizi (2011) emphasized meaning construction through integration of new information with background knowledge. Snow (2002) saw it as a simultaneous process of constructing and extracting meaning through interaction with written language.

Most scholars agree that reading comprehension includes cognitive and metacognitive abilities supported by strategy use (Hillerich, 1979; Randi, Newman, & Grigorenko, 2010). Yet no single definition prevails, partly due to a lack of focused research and the cognitive complexity of the process (Basaraba, Yovanoff, & Alonzo, 2013). In practice, reading comprehension instruction is often neglected, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Durkin, 1978; Ness, 2009; Pardo, 2004; Pressley, 2002), and many educators lack training in explicit instruction (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007).

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To address this, educators have turned to modeling the strategies of skilled readers. Strategic readers use prior knowledge, monitor comprehension, and adapt tactics as needed (Grabe, 2009; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Karbalaei, 2010; Pressley, 2000). They are actively involved cognitively and metacognitively, engaging in deliberate strategy use to understand texts (Block, 1992; Samuels & Farstrup, 2011; Yang, 2006).

Teaching students to be strategic requires understanding how such readers think and read. Being strategic entails consciously selecting and applying appropriate techniques (Brantmeier, 2002; McNamara, 2007; Oxford, 1990). Promoting strategic reading, even among already skilled readers, is vital (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008).

Research supports direct, explicit instruction as an effective method of teaching reading comprehension (Block & Parris, 2008; Harris & Pressley, 1991; Ness, 2011). Lessons should involve relevant materials, supportive environments, and motivating content (Duke et al., 2011; Loh & Tse, 2009; Morrow et al., 2009). Teacher scaffolding, guidance, and modeling are also crucial (Lloyd, 2004; Pressley, 1999).

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One promising resource is children's picture books, which combine simple language with engaging illustrations and have been found effective in fostering language and literacy development. Scholars such as Rosenblatt (1994), Paivio (1971), Ghosn (2002), and Lado (2012) support their use. Rosenblatt's transactional theory identified two stances: efferent (analytical/factual) and aesthetic (emotional/experiential), urging teachers to cultivate the latter for increased motivation and connection to texts.

Paivio's (1971) dual-coding theory highlighted the value of visual input, like images in picture books, in enhancing comprehension by aiding working memory (Sadoski & Paivio, 2013). Ghosn (2002) emphasized their authenticity and multicultural content as factors that support their effectiveness in ESL instruction.

Picture books have many qualities that make them suitable for EFL instruction: they use natural language, are easy to read, motivate learners, and offer multiple themes (Malloy, 1999; Burns, 2010; Doiron, 2003; Lado, 2012; Elia et al., 2010; Lohfink & Loya, 2010). They can be used to teach listening, speaking, writing, critical thinking, phonemic and graphemic awareness, and vocabulary (Heitman, 2005; Hsiu-Chin, 2008; Mundy & Hadaway, 1999; Smeets & Bus, 2012).

Despite their potential, picture books are underutilized in some EFL settings. For instance, they have not been integrated into English instruction in Libya (Al Khaiyali, 2013). Furthermore, many EFL and ESL classrooms still lack explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Mihara, 2011; Miller & Perkins, 1990; Yang, 2006).

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Given these issues, this study aims to explore the use of children's picture books as tools for teaching comprehension strategies in Iranian EFL classrooms. It investigates both teacher and student perceptions and seeks to contribute to improved pedagogical practices in language learning contexts.

Methodology
Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods case study design. The case study framework was selected to allow an in-depth exploration of teachers' and students' experiences with picture books in EFL classrooms (Yin, 2018). While the primary emphasis was on qualitative data, quantitative survey results were used to triangulate findings and broaden the scope of interpretation. This design was considered appropriate because it addressed the study's guiding questions concerning both the process and outcomes of integrating children's picture books into explicit reading comprehension instruction.

Research Context

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The study was conducted in two public middle schools located in Arak City, Iran. Both schools adhered to the national EFL curriculum, which traditionally emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and translation, with less explicit focus on comprehension strategy instruction (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2020). Each school offered three 90-minute English classes weekly. The study took place during the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.To align with existing curricular expectations, picture books were introduced as supplementary materials alongside the nationally prescribed EFL textbooks. Lessons were designed collaboratively with the participating teachers to ensure that the integration of picture books complemented the regular instructional program.

Participants

Participants included two EFL teachers and 40 students across two intact classrooms.

Teachers: Both teachers were female, held undergraduate degrees in English Language Teaching, and had between 8 and 12 years of experience teaching at the middle school level. They were selected through purposive sampling because of their openness to innovation and willingness to integrate picture books into instruction.

Students: A total of 40 seventh- and eighth-grade students (ages 12–14) participated. Each classroom comprised approximately 20 students. Students were considered to be at lower-intermediate proficiency, according to school placement records. Parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to participation.

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The sample size was sufficient for case study research, where the aim is depth and richness of insight rather than broad generalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Materials
Picture Books
Eight children's picture books were selected based on four criteria:

1. Appropriateness for learners aged 12–14.
2. Rich illustrations to support comprehension.
3. Narrative features that facilitated comprehension strategy instruction (e.g., predicting, inferring, summarizing).
4. Cultural neutrality to minimize misinterpretation.

Titles included both classic and contemporary works, chosen collaboratively by the teachers and researcher.

Textbooks

The national EFL textbooks, mandated by the Ministry of Education, were also used during the study. Observations included lessons where picture books and textbooks were taught, enabling analysis of whether comprehension strategies transferred across materials.

Instruments

1. Semi-structured interviews. Teacher interviews (45–60 minutes) explored perspectives on strategy instruction, challenges, and benefits of using picture books. Student interviews (20–30 minutes, n = 10) addressed perceptions of learning strategies and preferences for texts.
2. Classroom observations. Twelve lessons were observed (six per school). An observation protocol documented teacher practices, student engagement, and evidence of comprehension strategy use. Field notes and audio recordings supplemented the data.
3. Surveys. All 40 students completed a short survey including Likert-scale items and open-ended questions about their attitudes toward picture books, preferred comprehension strategies, and text preferences.
4. Classroom documents. Student worksheets, teacher lesson plans, and written reflections were collected to provide additional insights into instructional processes.

Procedures

The study was conducted in three phases:

1. Preparation (2 weeks). Orientation meetings introduced teachers to explicit comprehension strategy instruction using picture books. Books were selected, and consent was obtained.

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2. Implementation (6 weeks). Teachers integrated picture books into instruction, typically one book every four to five class sessions. Lessons followed a consistent structure:

- Pre-reading (activating prior knowledge, making predictions from illustrations).
- While-reading (highlighting vocabulary, questioning, inferring).
- Post-reading (summarizing, reflecting on strategies, applying strategies to textbook passages).

The researcher acted as a participant observer, taking field notes, recording lessons, and collecting classroom documents.

3. Reflection (2 weeks). Teacher and student interviews were conducted, surveys were administered, and classroom documents were compiled.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative Data

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Coding combined deductive categories, drawn from established reading comprehension strategy frameworks (e.g., cognitive and metacognitive strategies), with inductive categories emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents ensured analytic rigor.

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Quantitative Data

Survey data were analyzed descriptively using means, frequencies, and percentages. Open-ended responses were coded qualitatively and integrated with interview findings. Cross-tabulations explored links between students' strategy preferences and favored picture books.

Integration

Findings from qualitative and quantitative strands were integrated during interpretation. Convergent and divergent results were examined to construct a holistic account of participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

Several measures enhanced trustworthiness:

- Credibility. Prolonged engagement (10 weeks), triangulation, and member checking with teachers increased accuracy.
- Dependability. An audit trail of coding decisions and methodological notes was maintained.
- Confirmability. A reflexive journal documented researcher assumptions and potential biases.
- Transferability. Thick description of context and participants supports applicability to similar EFL settings.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board. Written parental consent and student assent were obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned, and participation was voluntary. Students were assured that non-participation would not affect their academic standing. Data were stored securely and reported in aggregated form.

Limitations

The study was limited by its small sample size and focus on a single urban area. While findings may not be generalizable to all Iranian EFL classrooms, the case study design offers contextually rich insights that can inform pedagogy in comparable contexts.

Analysis:
Overview

This study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of using children's picture books for explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction. Data from interviews, observations, surveys, and classroom documents revealed five major themes: (1) student engagement, (2) teacher recognition of effectiveness, (3) evidence of cognitive and

metacognitive strategy use, (4) links between preferences and strategies, and (5) challenges related to time and vocabulary.

1. Positive Student Engagement

Across all data sources, students showed **high levels of engagement** when picture books were used in class. Observations recorded enthusiastic participation in pre-reading predictions and group discussions. For example, during *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, students eagerly connected illustrations to prior knowledge, predicting content before reading.

Student interviews echoed these observations. One student noted, *"The pictures help me understand faster, and I want to know what happens next."* Similarly, 85% of survey respondents reported enjoying picture book activities, with none disagreeing.

These findings indicate that picture books fostered **motivation and affective involvement**, offering a contrast to the less visually stimulating national textbooks.

2. Teacher Recognition of Effectiveness

Both participating teachers described picture books as powerful tools for strategy instruction. In interviews, they highlighted how illustrations supported explicit teaching of prediction and inference. One teacher explained, *"Even weaker students can say something about the story by looking at the illustrations."*

Observations confirmed these perceptions: in several lessons, teachers asked students to infer characters' feelings from visual cues, scaffolding comprehension strategy practice. Teachers also valued how picture books contextualized vocabulary, making lessons more accessible compared to textbooks. Thus, teachers recognized picture books not only as engaging materials but also as effective scaffolds for explicit instruction.

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3. Evidence of Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Students demonstrated use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies when working with picture books and when applying strategies to textbook passages.

Cognitive Strategies

Observed behaviors included guessing meaning from context, summarizing, and identifying main ideas. In one lesson, students summarized *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* in three sentences, identifying character goals and outcomes. Survey results aligned: 72% agreed picture books helped them "understand the main idea" and 65% used illustrations for vocabulary support.

Metacognitive Strategies

Students also showed awareness of strategy use, particularly in monitoring comprehension and evaluating predictions. In post-reading discussions, they often compared initial predictions

with actual outcomes. As one student reflected: *"First I think what will happen, then when I read, I check if I was right."*

Together, these findings suggest that picture books created opportunities for strategy demonstration, practice, and reflection—key elements of comprehension instruction.

4. Links Between Preferences and Strategy Use

Analysis revealed connections between students' text preferences and their preferred strategies. Those favoring narrative picture books (e.g., *Where the Wild Things Are*) tended to enjoy prediction and inference, while students preferring informational texts emphasized summarizing and detail identification. Survey data supported this: among the 25 students who chose narrative texts as favorites, 80% reported prediction as their most frequent strategy. Conversely, two-thirds of the 15 students preferring informational texts identified summarizing as primary. Interview data reinforced this pattern. One student explained, *"I like guessing what will happen to the characters,"* while another noted, *"I prefer books that give information. I underline and try to remember the main points."*

These findings suggest that genre and strategy preferences are interrelated, providing practical implications for differentiated instruction.

5. Challenges: Time and Vocabulary

Despite overall positive outcomes, participants noted practical challenges. Teachers emphasized limited instructional time, constrained by curriculum requirements: *"We must cover the textbook, and there is not always enough time for picture books."* Observations confirmed that some post-reading discussions were shortened to keep pace with the syllabus.

Vocabulary also emerged as a barrier. While illustrations helped, certain words remained difficult for students. One student stated, *"Sometimes the story has words we don't know, and even with pictures, it is confusing."* Teachers felt tension between dedicating time to strategy practice and addressing unfamiliar vocabulary, reflecting the curriculum's heavy emphasis on lexical mastery.

Integration of Findings

The five themes collectively illustrate both the promise and challenges of incorporating picture books into Iranian EFL classrooms. On the positive side, picture books increased student engagement, supported explicit strategy instruction, and encouraged both cognitive and metacognitive strategy use. Moreover, strategy preferences appeared to align with text types, suggesting opportunities for individualized approaches. At the same time, systemic challenges—particularly time constraints and vocabulary demands—limited the extent to which picture book pedagogy could be fully implemented. These challenges reflect broader structural issues in the Iranian EFL curriculum, which prioritizes textbook coverage and vocabulary memorization over strategic comprehension instruction.

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Discussion:

 Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of children's picture books as tools for explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction in Iranian EFL classrooms. Findings revealed that students responded positively to picture books, teachers found them effective for strategy instruction, and both cognitive and metacognitive strategy use was evident. Furthermore, student preferences for picture book genres corresponded to their preferred comprehension strategies. However, the integration of picture books faced barriers related to limited instructional time and vocabulary challenges. This section interprets these findings in light of existing literature, discusses their pedagogical implications, and highlights limitations and directions for future research.

Engagement and Motivation in Reading

One of the most prominent findings was the high level of **student engagement** with picture books. Students demonstrated enthusiasm during pre-reading activities, eagerly participated in predicting storylines, and expressed enjoyment in reading materials that differed from their routine textbooks. This finding is consistent with research showing that multimodal texts, particularly those combining visuals with simplified narratives, enhance learners' motivation and comprehension (Sipe, 2008; Jalongo, 2013).

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In EFL contexts, where students often perceive reading as difficult and monotonous, engagement is a crucial factor. Day and Bamford's (1998) extensive reading model emphasizes the role of interest and enjoyment in fostering reading fluency and comprehension. The use of picture books appears to align with this principle by lowering affective filters (Krashen, 1982) and creating an accessible entry point to reading tasks. For Iranian learners accustomed to grammar-heavy instruction, the affective benefits of picture books may be particularly significant, as they transform reading from a burdensome task into an enjoyable experience.

Teachers' Recognition of Pedagogical Value

Teachers' positive perceptions further confirm the **pedagogical potential of picture books**. They highlighted how illustrations enabled them to explicitly model strategies such as predicting and inferring, even for weaker students. This resonates with studies in ESL/EFL settings suggesting that visual scaffolding supports learners in making meaning from texts (Elley, 2000; Ghosn, 2002). The findings also suggest that picture books may help teachers shift from **product-oriented reading instruction**—focused primarily on correct answers—to a **process-oriented approach** where strategies are explicitly taught and practiced. Grabe (2009) argues that explicit instruction in comprehension strategies is essential for developing skilled readers, yet in many EFL classrooms, including Iranian contexts, such instruction is limited. Picture books, by virtue of their visual cues and accessible narratives, appear to provide a natural platform for embedding strategy instruction within authentic reading experiences.

Strategy Use: Cognitive and Metacognitive Dimensions

This aligns with Anderson's (2002) distinction between cognitive strategies (direct manipulation of text) and metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating). Prior research has shown that successful readers draw on both sets of strategies (Pressley, 2000; Zhang, 2010). The fact that Iranian students demonstrated such behaviors suggests that picture books not only facilitated comprehension but also fostered **strategic awareness**, an area often underdeveloped in EFL instruction. Moreover, the observed transfer of strategies from picture books to textbook passages is noteworthy. It suggests that strategy instruction embedded in engaging texts may have **transferable benefits**, enabling learners to approach more demanding academic materials with greater confidence and awareness.

Alignment Between Text Preferences and Strategy Preferences

A novel finding of this study was the apparent relationship between students' **preferred picture books** and their **favored comprehension strategies**. Narrative texts were associated with prediction and inference, while informational texts corresponded to summarizing and identifying key details. This pattern reflects broader theories of **reader-text interaction** (Rosenblatt, 1994), which emphasize that meaning-making is shaped not only by the text but also by the reader's stance and preferences. It also resonates with research in strategy instruction suggesting that learners gravitate toward strategies that align with their interests and perceived strengths (Oxford, 2011).

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Pedagogically, this finding highlights the importance of **differentiated instruction**. By considering students' genre preferences, teachers can design lessons that both engage learners and capitalize on their natural strategy inclinations, while also encouraging them to broaden their repertoire.

Challenges: Time and Vocabulary

Despite the positive findings, challenges related to **time constraints and vocabulary** emerged. Teachers struggled to balance the mandated curriculum with supplementary use of picture books. This is consistent with studies documenting how rigid curricular frameworks in many EFL contexts restrict teachers' autonomy and innovation (Rahimi & Naderi, 2014). Without institutional support, picture books risk being viewed as optional add-ons rather than integral components of reading instruction.

Vocabulary was another recurring issue. While illustrations provided some support, certain lexical items remained difficult for students, highlighting the tension between focusing on comprehension strategies and meeting curriculum demands for vocabulary mastery. This echoes Nation's (2013) argument that vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension should be integrated but often compete for instructional time.

Together, these challenges underscore that while picture books hold promise, their successful integration requires systemic adjustments in curriculum design and teacher training.

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Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for EFL pedagogy in Iran and similar contexts:

1. Integrating multimodal texts. Picture books should be incorporated into middle school curricula as complementary texts to foster engagement and provide a context for strategy instruction.
2. Explicit strategy instruction. Teachers should use picture books to model and practice both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, then guide students in transferring these strategies to textbook passages.
3. Differentiated approaches. Considering students' text and strategy preferences can help teachers design more personalized reading activities, increasing both motivation and effectiveness.
4. Teacher training. Professional development should equip teachers with practical methods for balancing vocabulary instruction and strategy instruction, as well as for integrating picture books within tight curricular schedules.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could expand this work in several directions:

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- Larger samples. Replicating the study across multiple schools and regions would strengthen the external validity of findings.
- Comparative studies. Comparing outcomes of classrooms using picture books with those relying solely on textbooks could provide stronger evidence of impact.
- Teacher development studies. Investigating how teacher training influences implementation of picture book pedagogy would address systemic challenges.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that children's picture books can serve as effective tools for explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction in Iranian EFL classrooms. They engaged students, supported teacher modeling of strategies, and encouraged both cognitive and metacognitive strategy use. Furthermore, the alignment between students' text preferences and strategy use highlights the potential of differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, practical barriers such as limited instructional time and vocabulary challenges must be addressed for picture book pedagogy to be sustainable. The findings underscore the importance of curricular flexibility and teacher support in transforming reading instruction from a product-oriented to a strategy-focused process. Ultimately, integrating picture books has the potential not only to improve comprehension but also to make reading a more meaningful and enjoyable experience for EFL learners.

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