

Literature for Empowerment: Using Picture Books to Promote SDG Awareness and Reading Skills in Indonesian Junior High Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates how picture books, through their visual and textual storytelling integration, can enhance reading comprehension and promote social awareness within an under-resourced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Conducted at SMP Negeri 4 Jirak Jaya in South Sumatra, Indonesia, the research examines the effectiveness of picture book-based instruction in improving students' narrative reading skills and encouraging reflection on issues such as poverty and inequality, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 4, and 10). Employing a mixed-methods case study design, the study involved 13 Grade 8 students, 11 of whom were primary contributors to their families' income and were purposefully selected as key participants. Quantitative data were collected through validated and reliable pre- and post-tests on narrative reading comprehension. Results demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in students' reading scores, with mean scores increasing from 54.09 to 73.86 ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 5.75$), indicating a large effect size. Normality tests supported the appropriateness of parametric statistical analysis. Complementing these findings, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews revealed students' strong emotional and personal connections to the stories. Thematic analysis yielded five key themes: emotional responses, personal experiences, favorite story elements, increased motivation to study, and lessons learned. Students consistently reported that the narratives reflected their real-life experiences and responsibilities, fostering a sense of validation, motivation, and deeper engagement with social issues. These findings highlight picture books' pedagogical potential in developing reading comprehension and cultivating empathy and critical reflection among learners in marginalized educational settings.

Keywords: English education, picture books, reading comprehension, literacy, SDG.

INTRODUCTION

In many under-resourced regions of Indonesia, English language education continues to face a range of systemic and contextual challenges, including limited access to diverse learning materials and the scarcity of pedagogical resources that reflect students' socio-cultural environments (Herizal et al., 2023; Poedjiastutie et al., 2021; Riadi, 2019). These

constraints are particularly evident in rural and economically marginalized communities, where educational settings lack sufficient infrastructure, instructional support, and opportunities for authentic language exposure (Mudra, 2018; Sari, 2021). Students often balance academic responsibilities with various forms of domestic or income-generating work in such contexts, directly impacting their time, energy, and focus for language learning (Azzizah, 2015; Dwirianto & Wahyuni, 2022). Consequently, the extent to which students engage meaningfully with English instruction is shaped by cognitive and linguistic factors and the relevance of learning materials to their everyday lives. Hossain (2024) emphasized that literature-based language learning (LBL) supports linguistic development, cultural awareness, and critical thinking by connecting students with socially relevant narratives. Content that acknowledges learners' socio-economic and cultural contexts offers a responsive approach to sustaining motivation and participation in English classrooms, particularly in settings where structural limitations intersect with broader social inequalities (Nykoll, 2018; Sanjurjo et al., 2017; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2015).

Furthermore, integrating content that acknowledges learners' social contexts offers a responsive approach to supporting motivation and participation in English classrooms (Lau & Shea, 2022; Alejo & Piquer-Píriz, 2016), particularly in settings where structural limitations intersect with broader socio-economic pressures (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018). Picture books have emerged as pedagogically rich and socially relevant resources in this regard. As multimodal literary works, picture books combine visual imagery and written language to construct layered narratives that promote linguistic development and critical engagement (Reyes-Torres & Raga, 2020; Louie & Sierschynski, 2015; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2017). The interplay between visual and verbal elements encourages interpretation, inference, and deeper connections with textual content, supporting vocabulary acquisition, narrative competence, and higher-order comprehension skills (De Quirós et al., 2011; Callow, 2020). When thoughtfully selected, picture books also introduce social and cultural themes that reflect learners' lived experiences and stimulate reflection on broader societal issues. In addition to linguistic benefits, picture books can contribute meaningfully to the promotion of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) awareness, particularly concerning SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). SDG awareness involves critically engaging with global challenges and developing values such as empathy, equity, and social responsibility (Buerkle et al., 2023; Taimur & Sattar, 2020). Rather than merely serving as a vehicle for factual knowledge, instruction integrating SDG-related themes encourages meaningful connections between educational content and real-world issues.

Reading comprehension holds particular significance among the many language skills that can benefit from multimodal, context-sensitive instruction. Reading comprehension, a foundational component of language literacy, refers to the ability to extract, interpret, and construct meaning from written texts (Kendeou et al., 2016; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Butterfuss et al., 2020; Svetina et al., 2011). It involves a complex integration of cognitive and linguistic processes, including decoding, making inferences, identifying main ideas, monitoring understanding, and connecting prior knowledge with new information (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2018; Oakhill et al., 2014). Effective reading comprehension supports academic achievement across disciplines and fosters critical thinking, autonomy, and lifelong learning (Rad, 2025; Medranda-Morales et al., 2023). As readers become more

proficient, comprehension extends beyond literal understanding to include interpretive and evaluative dimensions, enabling engagement with diverse texts and perspectives.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly through literary and multimodal texts. [Putri et al. \(2024\)](#) explored the use of bilingual picture books to introduce climate change concepts to young learners in South Sumatra, finding that such texts not only enhanced environmental awareness but also fostered reading interest and language development. Similarly, [Moghadam et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that incorporating sustainability education into reading instruction significantly improved both reading comprehension and empathy among primary EFL learners in Iran. In higher education, literary texts have also been shown to support ESD objectives. [Manurung et al. \(2024\)](#) found that student-produced literary texts effectively enhanced awareness of the SDGs among Indonesian EFL students, though teacher integration of the goals remained limited. [Arikan and Zorba \(2024\)](#) further highlighted the value of literary materials in preparing pre-service English teachers to teach sustainability-related content, noting increased understanding and positive attitudes toward the SDGs. However, [Jodoin and Singer \(2020\)](#), through a corpus analysis of EFL textbooks in Japanese universities, observed that while environmental themes were present, the image-text interplay often failed to promote meaningful engagement with ESD principles.

While prior research has demonstrated the potential of literary texts and picture books in promoting sustainable development and enhancing language skills, most studies have centered on themes like climate change and environmental education, typically in early childhood, urban, or higher education contexts. Limited attention has been given to how picture books can be used in under-resourced secondary schools to support reading comprehension and social awareness, particularly concerning poverty and inequality. This study addresses that gap by examining picture books as dual-purpose tools for fostering literacy and critical social consciousness among junior high school students in a rural Indonesian context. Its novelty lies in focusing on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), topics that remain underexplored in EFL picture book research. Accordingly, this study investigates how picture books enhance student engagement and reading comprehension through visual and textual storytelling while cultivating empathy and social awareness. It specifically explores how their use in English instruction at SMP Negeri 4 Jirak Jaya supports students' narrative reading development and prompts reflection on socio-economic realities relevant to their lives.

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to investigate the dual role of picture books in enhancing students' reading comprehension and fostering social awareness within the context of English language learning. Mixed methods enable a more comprehensive understanding by combining the statistical rigor of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018](#)). The quantitative component focuses on assessing changes in students' narrative reading comprehension following the implementation of picture book-based instruction. This phase employs a structured pre- and post-test format to measure learning gains and determine the instructional impact through numerical data ([Ary et al., 2019](#)). Simultaneously, the qualitative component explores students' perceptions of the social themes embedded in the

visual and textual narratives, particularly issues related to poverty and inequality. Through semi-structured interviews, the study captures how students interpret and relate to the stories, providing insight into how much picture books can promote critical reflection and empathy (Yin, 2016; Serafini, 2014). This approach is particularly appropriate for educational research situated in under-resourced contexts, where learner development encompasses academic achievement, identity formation, and social awareness (Greene, 2007).

The study was conducted at a junior high school and involved 13 rural junior high school students. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants whose backgrounds were closely aligned with the study's objectives. Of the 13 students, 11 actively contributed to their families' financial support through various forms of informal labor. These 11 students were identified as the primary participants, as their socio-economic experiences were particularly relevant to investigating how picture books promote reading comprehension and social awareness. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate in this context because it allows researchers to intentionally select individuals who can provide rich, context-specific insights into the phenomenon under study (Etikan, 2016). While the sample size was limited, it reflects the realities of small-scale classroom-based research in under-resourced educational settings. Such focused inquiry is valuable for generating foundational insights into the pedagogical impact of picture books on learner outcomes in authentic environments, especially where generalizability is not the primary aim but rather depth of understanding and contextual relevance (Patton, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018).

To evaluate the impact of picture books on students' reading comprehension, this study employed a set of pre- and post-tests specifically designed to assess students' understanding of narrative texts. The instrument consisted of 40 multiple-choice questions, each offering four answer options (a, b, c, d). It was administered at two intervals: before the instructional intervention (pre-test) and after the intervention (post-test). The pre-test established a baseline measure of students' narrative reading proficiency, while the post-test captured any changes in performance following the integration of picture books into classroom instruction. This test-based approach aligns with standard practices in assessing reading comprehension in EFL contexts, where structured, objective measures provide quantifiable evidence of learning outcomes (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Ary et al., 2019).

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating students to gain deeper insights into how they perceived and engaged with the social themes embedded in the picture books. The interviews focused on students' motivation to learn about their socio-economic circumstances, particularly for those who were contributing to their families' financial needs. The interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions to explore students' reflections on the narratives and their relevance to their lives. This qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to elicit detailed, context-rich responses that illuminate learners' perspectives and emotional engagement, especially critical when investigating the socio-affective dimensions of reading (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2016).

To ensure the validity of the reading comprehension test, a pilot study was conducted involving 30 seventh-grade students who were not part of the main study. Item validity was examined using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, where each item's score was correlated with the total test score. The obtained significance values were

compared against the critical value of r (0.361) from the correlation table. Items with correlation values exceeding this threshold were considered valid, resulting in 45 valid items. From these, 40 items were selected for the final version of the test based on clarity, content coverage, and item quality. Internal consistency was measured using the split-half method to assess the instrument's reliability, and the results were analyzed using the Spearman-Brown formula via SPSS. The reliability coefficient was 0.739, which exceeds the commonly accepted minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability (Ary et al., 2019; Fraenkel et al., 2012). These procedures confirm that this study's reading comprehension instrument was valid and reliable for measuring students' narrative reading skills in an EFL context.

Following data collection, the qualitative data from student interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the researcher to capture recurring themes related to how picture books influenced students' motivation to learn and how the stories resonated with their roles and responsibilities within their families. For the quantitative analysis, a paired-sample t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant improvement in students' narrative reading comprehension after the instructional intervention. Before the t-test, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were tested. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, and homogeneity was evaluated through Levene's test. Both assumptions were met, as indicated by p-values exceeding the .05 threshold, validating the use of parametric testing. In addition to reporting statistical significance (p-value), the effect size was calculated using Cohen's d to determine the magnitude of the observed difference. A 95% confidence interval for the mean difference was also reported to estimate the likely range of improvement (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). This combined analytical strategy offered both statistical and practical insights into the effectiveness of picture books in enhancing students' narrative reading achievement within an under-resourced EFL classroom.

FINDINGS

The quantitative findings focus on improving students' narrative reading comprehension following picture book-based instruction, as measured through pre- and post-test scores. Meanwhile, the qualitative findings explore students' perceptions of how the picture books influenced their motivation to learn and their reflections on the social issues depicted in the texts, particularly poverty and inequality. Together, these findings provide a comprehensive view of picture books' role in enhancing both academic outcomes and social awareness in an under-resourced EFL classroom setting.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' pretest–posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	11	45	67.50	54.09	6.8257
Posttest	11	70	85.00	73.86	5.0452

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of students' scores on the reading comprehension pretest and posttest, administered before and after the picture book-based instruction. The data involve 11 students. In the pretest, the scores ranged from 45 to 67.50, with a mean score of 54.09 and a standard deviation of 6.83, indicating moderate variability

in students' initial reading performance. In contrast, the posttest scores ranged from 70 to 85.00, showing a substantial improvement. The mean score increased to 73.86, and the standard deviation decreased to 5.05, suggesting that students not only performed better overall, but their scores also became more consistent. These initial descriptive results indicate a marked improvement in students' narrative reading comprehension following the intervention using picture books.

Table 2. The result of the normality test of students' pretest-posttest

	Kolmogorov Smirnov	Sig.	Result
Pretest	0.180	0.200	Normal
Posttest	0.243	0.069	Normal

Table 2 presents the results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test conducted to determine whether the distribution of students' pretest and posttest scores met the assumption of normality required for parametric statistical analysis. The pretest yielded a Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic of 0.180 with a significance value (Sig.) of 0.200, while the posttest produced a statistic of 0.243 and a Sig. Value of 0.069. Since both significance values are above the commonly used threshold of 0.05, the data for both pretest and posttest can be considered normally distributed. This confirms that the assumption of normality is met, allowing for parametric tests, such as the paired-sample *t*-test, in the subsequent analysis.

Table 3. Analysis result of paired sample *t*-test from students' pretest to posttest scores

Picture Book	Paired Sample T-Test				95% Confidence Interval	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	-19.77	-19.08	10	0.000	(-22.08, -17.46)	5.75

Table 3 presents the results of the paired-sample *t*-test conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference in students' reading comprehension scores before and after using picture books in English instruction. The analysis shows a mean difference of -19.77 between the pretest and posttest scores, indicating a substantial improvement. The *t*-value of -19.08 with 10 degrees of freedom yielded a *p*-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), confirming that the improvement is statistically significant. In addition, the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranges from -22.08 to -17.46, suggesting that the true mean difference is significant and consistently large across the sample. The effect size, calculated using Cohen's *d*, was 5.75, which is considered a very large effect, indicating a strong practical impact of the picture book-based instruction on students' narrative reading comprehension. These results demonstrate that picture books greatly enhanced students' reading achievement in a rural EFL classroom setting.

Qualitative Findings

The study's qualitative phase sought to capture students' nuanced perspectives regarding their engagement with picture book narratives. Semi-structured interviews provided rich, in-depth accounts that illuminated the emotional, cognitive, and motivational dimensions of students' reading experiences. Analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing recurrent patterns to emerge inductively from the data while remaining anchored to the research questions. The resulting themes: Emotional Responses, Personal

Experiences, Favorite Parts of the Story, Increased Motivation to Study, and Lessons Learned, reflect how students interacted with the texts and integrated these narratives into their identities, values, and aspirations. Table 4 presents the thematic analysis, including concise descriptions and representative quotes that exemplify each theme.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis of Student Interviews

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Emotional Responses	Students expressed strong emotional connections to picture book narratives, feeling happiness, familiarity, and recognition when encountering characters whose lives reflected their experiences. These emotions enhanced comprehension and created a sense of belonging.	"I felt happy because the stories reminded me of helping my parents after school." (S1) "The girl in the story is just like me. She helps her mother every day. It made me feel like the story was about my family too." (S4)
Personal Experiences	Many students identified parallels between their real-life responsibilities and those of the characters, such as doing chores and contributing to family income, reinforcing cultural values of familial responsibility.	"Yes, I help my parents with chores. I wash the dishes and sometimes take care of my younger siblings." (S6) "On weekends, I go to the market to help sell vegetables. When I read the story about the boy who helps his family, it felt like my own life." (S2)
Favorite Parts of the Story	Students favored scenes portraying perseverance, family care, and commitment to education, especially when characters balanced work and study, qualities they admired and emulated.	"I liked the part where the child helps their mother while still studying because it felt like my life." (S1) "The best part for me was when the boy wakes up early to work, then still goes to school. That's what I do too. I help my father with the cows before school." (S7)
Increased Motivation to Study	Reading about characters who overcame adversity inspired students to value education more and persist in their studies despite challenges.	"Yes, because the story shows that even when life is hard, we can still succeed if we keep studying." (S1) "I don't always like studying, but after reading the story, I thought I should be more serious because the character never gave up." (S9)
Lessons Learned	Students extracted moral and practical lessons, emphasizing perseverance, responsibility, gratitude, and hope, demonstrating deep engagement beyond surface enjoyment.	"I learned that hard work and education are important." (S3) "Even if we don't have much money, we can still study and help our families." (S5) "The stories taught me to be grateful and keep going, even when things are hard." (S8)

The thematic analysis of student interviews revealed a multidimensional interplay between emotional engagement, personal identification, and motivational development from picture book narratives. In the emotional responses theme, participants reported feelings of happiness, familiarity, and recognition when encountering characters whose circumstances mirrored their lived experiences. Such affective resonance appeared to

transform reading from a purely academic activity into a personally meaningful encounter. As one student reflected, *"I felt happy because the stories reminded me of helping my parents after school"* (S1). At the same time, another stated, *"The girl in the story is just like me. She helps her mother every day. It made me feel like the story was about my family too"* (S4). These narratives thus served as affirmations of students' identities and everyday realities, strengthening their sense of belonging within the classroom context.

The theme of personal experiences further illuminated this identification, with students frequently drawing parallels between their responsibilities at home and those depicted in the stories. Tasks such as household chores, sibling care, and financial contributions were cited as shared experiences with the characters. For instance, one participant explained, *"On weekends, I go to the market to help sell vegetables. When I read the story about the boy who helps his family, it felt like my own life"* (S2). This alignment between literature and lived reality reinforced culturally embedded values surrounding familial responsibility and interdependence.

Students' favorite parts of the story consistently centered on scenes that depicted perseverance, dedication to family, and commitment to education despite hardship. Admiration for such traits was evident, as one student noted, *"I liked the part where the child helps their mother while still studying because it felt like my life"* (S1). Another elaborated, *"The best part for me was when the boy wakes up early to work, then still goes to school. That's what I do too"* (S7). These reflections indicate that relatable content can foster aspirational identification, where learners connect with characters and internalize their virtues as models for personal conduct.

The increased motivation to study the theme highlighted the transformative potential of these narratives. Students articulated that reading about characters who persisted in their studies despite socio-economic challenges inspired them to approach their education more seriously. One participant explained, *"The story shows that even when life is hard, we can still succeed if we keep studying"* (S1). Another confessed, *"I don't always like studying, but after reading the story, I thought I should be more serious because the character never gave up"* (S9). Such responses suggest that the affective and situational relevance of the texts functioned as catalysts for self-reflection, goal-setting, and the reinforcement of academic persistence.

Finally, the lessons learned theme demonstrated that students could derive moral and practical insights from the narratives, reflecting a depth of engagement beyond surface-level enjoyment. These lessons encompassed perseverance, responsibility, gratitude, and hope. As one student summarized, *"Even if we don't have much money, we can still study and help our families"* (S5), while another observed, *"The stories taught me to be grateful and keep going, even when things are hard"* (S8). These findings indicate that culturally resonant picture books can serve as powerful pedagogical tools that simultaneously validate learner identities, mirror their lived experiences, and cultivate dispositions conducive to both personal and academic growth.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study underscore the significant role that picture books play in enhancing reading comprehension and emotional engagement among junior high school students in under-resourced settings. The quantitative data revealed a substantial improvement in students' reading comprehension scores, rising from a mean of 54.09 in the pre-test to 73.86 in the post-test. This gain was statistically significant ($t = -19.08, p < 0.001$)

with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 5.75$), highlighting the educational value of the intervention. These results align with previous studies that emphasize how picture books, when paired with multimodal strategies, foster learners' motivation and deepen comprehension by integrating visual and textual storytelling (Chen et al., 2023; Hui et al., 2020). Interactive use of picture books has been shown to promote sustained interest, emotional resonance, and learner autonomy, factors also evident in the students' qualitative responses in this study (Sun, 2022). The improvement observed here reflects a cognitive gain and a pedagogical shift toward accessible and contextually relevant materials that support language learning in challenging socio-economic environments.

This cognitive gain is closely tied to the emotional and motivational dimensions identified in the qualitative data (Singh et al., 2022; Yeo & Ong, 2024). Students frequently reported strong personal connections to the picture books, particularly to narratives depicting family struggles, perseverance, mutual support, and experiences reflecting their lives. These emotional resonances heighten engagement during reading activities, supporting their comprehension (Tomé-Fernández et al., 2019; Batini et al., 2020; Sun, 2015). Research in reading pedagogy consistently indicates that emotional involvement enhances cognitive processing, enabling learners to understand, retain, and apply textual information more effectively (Bayer et al., 2010; Altmann et al., 2012; Hamed et al., 2019; Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli, 2011). Thus, the observed improvement in test scores reflects the benefits of instructional design and the impact of culturally relevant and emotionally engaging materials in fostering deeper reader-text interaction.

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed five recurring patterns: emotional responses, personal experiences, favorite parts of the story, increased motivation to study, and lessons learned. Students frequently expressed empathy and a sense of validation when reading about characters who faced similar challenges, a finding consistent with Junker and Jacquemin (2017) and Hammond and Kim (2014). These responses illustrate the dual impact of the intervention, enhancing literacy while promoting personal affirmation and social awareness (Howard & Ticknor, 2019; Rapa et al., 2020; Kozak & Recchia, 2018). The narratives prompted students to reflect on their lives, familial responsibilities, and educational aspirations. This emotional engagement likely reinforced their motivation to learn, aligning with Amini and Amini (2017), who emphasize integrating emotional, motivational, and cognitive engagement to foster a state of flow in language learning. Notably, many students reported that the perseverance of story characters inspired them to adopt similar attitudes toward their academic efforts. Several shared that, despite the financial responsibilities they shoulder at home, the stories helped them believe in the attainability of success through education. This motivational effect is especially significant in rural contexts, where students often balance schoolwork with labor or caregiving duties (Schafft, 2016; Redding & Walberg, 2012). In this way, picture books served as tools for improving reading comprehension and as sources of moral encouragement and aspirational vision, key elements of holistic education.

These findings are directly aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The content of the picture books introduced students to narratives that portrayed poverty, resilience, and social inequity, encouraging critical reflection on the systemic challenges in their communities. In doing so, the books contributed not only to

academic development but also to the cultivation of empathy, ethical reasoning, and global awareness, competencies essential to education for sustainable development (Estrada et al., 2021; O'Flaherty & Liddy, 2017; Franck & Osbeck, 2017). Furthermore, integrating picture books into English language instruction resulted in substantial improvements in reading comprehension, as demonstrated by statistically significant test results and a large effect size. These findings are consistent with prior studies that highlight the pedagogical value of picture books in language education (Wardani et al., 2021; Shen & Huang, 2021; Wu & Amzah, 2023). In this study, picture books functioned as dual-purpose tools, enhancing literacy while fostering critical consciousness and social responsibility. Especially in under-resourced classrooms, picture books proved to be not only accessible and engaging instructional materials but also powerful instruments for transformative learning grounded in empathy, identity formation, and sustainable development values.

CONCLUSION

This study found that picture books are effective pedagogical tools for improving reading comprehension and supporting students' social-emotional development in under-resourced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The quantitative data indicated a significant increase in students' narrative reading scores following the intervention, suggesting that integrating visual and textual elements contributed to improved comprehension. Qualitative findings supported this outcome, showing that students related personally to the stories, particularly themes involving family responsibilities, persistence, and overcoming hardship. These connections enhanced students' emotional engagement and learning motivation, supporting their academic performance. The narratives reflected aspects of students' everyday lives, allowing them to see their experiences represented in classroom materials and to develop empathy, perseverance, and a stronger sense of purpose in their studies.

The use of picture books also contributed to students' understanding of social issues aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Through relatable characters and accessible storytelling, students engaged with topics such as poverty and educational aspiration in ways that complemented their language learning. The findings indicate that picture books can support literacy and values-based education in EFL contexts, particularly when instructional materials respond to students' social realities. Further research involving more diverse settings and larger samples would help expand understanding of the broader implications of using picture books to support equitable English language instruction.

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