

Unlocking the World of Words: Exploring the Use of Picture Storybooks in Enhancing Early Childhood Speaking Skills

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Abstract

Purpose	: Speaking ability is a fundamental aspect of early childhood language development, as it underpins effective communication and social interaction. However, many children in early childhood education settings still exhibit limited speaking skills, necessitating appropriate instructional strategies. This study aims to describe teacher strategies in improving early childhood speaking skills through picture storybooks and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the learning process at Group B of TK Islam Yaroja.
Methodology	: This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. The participants consisted of one classroom teacher and 20 children of Group B at TK Islam Yaroja. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using an interactive model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.
Results	: The findings revealed that teacher strategies, including interactive reading, question-and-answer activities, and story retelling using picture storybooks, effectively improved children's speaking skills. Of the twelve children who were initially categorized as undeveloped, ten showed significant improvement, progressing into the developing and developed as expected categories. Supporting factors included children's enthusiasm toward picture storybooks and the teacher's creativity in delivering stories, while inhibiting factors included limited book availability and varying levels of children's confidence.
Conclusions	: Picture storybooks serve as an effective learning medium for stimulating children's confidence and enhancing their speaking ability in early childhood education settings. Teacher strategies that incorporate interactive and dialogic approaches through picture storybooks can significantly foster children's verbal development. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on early childhood language pedagogy and offer practical implications for educators seeking to optimize speaking skill development in kindergarten settings.

Keywords: teacher instructional strategy; early childhood speaking development; picture storybooks; dialogic reading; kindergarten language pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Speaking ability is a fundamental component of early childhood language development that serves as the foundation for communication, self-expression, and social interaction. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, language development in early childhood is closely intertwined with cognitive growth, as children construct meaning and develop higher-order thinking through verbal exchanges with more knowledgeable others in their social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Complementing this perspective, Piaget (1962) argued that children's language emerges from their cognitive development, suggesting that speaking skills develop as children actively engage with their environment through symbolic play and imitative activities. In the context of early childhood education, speaking skills enable children to express their thoughts, negotiate with peers, participate in classroom discourse, and build the linguistic competence necessary for academic readiness in subsequent educational stages (Otto, 2015). Lonigan et al. (2000) further demonstrated that oral language proficiency in preschool serves as a significant predictor of emergent literacy and early reading skills, reinforcing the critical importance of systematic speaking skill development during the early years. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, through Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014 concerning National Standards for Early Childhood Education, explicitly identifies language development particularly speaking ability as one of the six developmental domains

that must be stimulated during the early years. Therefore, fostering children's speaking skills in early childhood education settings is not merely a pedagogical preference but an educational imperative.

Despite the recognized importance of speaking development, empirical evidence suggests that many children in early childhood education institutions continue to exhibit limited verbal abilities. Research conducted by Dhieni et al. (2021) found that a significant proportion of children aged 5-6 years in Indonesian kindergartens demonstrated below-expected speaking competencies, particularly in areas such as expressing opinions, constructing coherent narratives, and engaging in dialogic conversations. Similarly, Christiani (2015) reported that children's reluctance to speak in classroom settings is often attributed to insufficient exposure to language-rich learning environments and the predominance of teacher-centered instructional approaches that provide limited opportunities for children's verbal participation. These findings indicate a persistent gap between the ideal standards of speaking development outlined in the national curriculum and the actual conditions observed in many early childhood education practices.

One of the critical factors influencing children's speaking development is the instructional strategy employed by teachers. Effective teaching strategies that incorporate interactive, dialogic, and media-supported approaches have been shown to significantly enhance children's verbal engagement and language production (Zucker et al., 2013). Conversely, monotonous and lecture-based strategies that lack variation and meaningful learning media tend to render children passive and disengaged during speaking activities (Santrock, 2020). Hoff (2014) emphasized that children's language development thrives in environments where they receive frequent, responsive, and linguistically rich input from adults, further underscoring the need for interactive instructional approaches. In this regard, the selection of appropriate instructional media becomes essential in creating a stimulating learning environment that encourages children to actively practice and develop their speaking skills. Among various learning media available for early childhood education, picture storybooks have gained considerable attention from researchers and practitioners as an effective tool for language stimulation.

Picture storybooks are learning media that integrate visual and verbal elements, providing children with contextual cues that facilitate comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and narrative construction (Sipe, 2008). The combination of colorful illustrations and engaging storylines in picture storybooks captures children's attention and motivates them to participate in storytelling activities, thereby creating natural opportunities for speaking practice (Jalongo, 2004). Morrow (2015) further asserted that picture storybooks provide a multisensory learning experience that supports not only speaking development but also listening comprehension, vocabulary expansion, and narrative awareness in young children. Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of picture storybooks in enhancing children's language development. Mol and Bus (2011) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that shared reading of picture storybooks significantly contributed to children's vocabulary growth and oral language skills. Furthermore, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) established that dialogic reading techniques using picture storybooks, where adults engage children in interactive discussions about the story produced substantial improvements in children's expressive language abilities. In the Indonesian context, Tarigan (2018) emphasized that picture storybooks serve as a bridge between visual comprehension and verbal expression, enabling children to retell stories, describe illustrations, and articulate their interpretations.

However, while existing literature has extensively examined the general effectiveness of picture storybooks on language development, limited studies have specifically explored the strategies employed by teachers in utilizing picture storybooks to enhance speaking skills within naturalistic classroom settings, particularly in rural Indonesian kindergartens. Most previous studies adopted experimental or quasi-experimental designs that measured outcomes

quantitatively, leaving a gap in understanding the processual and contextual dimensions of how teachers strategically implement picture storybook-based activities and navigate the supporting and inhibiting factors encountered during the learning process. This gap warrants further investigation through a qualitative lens that captures the richness and complexity of classroom practices.

Based on the aforementioned background, this study was conducted at Group B of TK Islam Yaroja, Jeruk Manis Village, where preliminary observations revealed that 12 out of 20 children exhibited underdeveloped speaking abilities, characterized by difficulties in expressing opinions verbally, reluctance to speak in front of peers, and inability to retell stories coherently. This study aims to describe the teacher strategies used in improving early childhood speaking skills through picture storybooks and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the learning process. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of teacher strategies in a specific rural kindergarten context, providing contextually grounded insights that complement the predominantly quantitative body of literature on picture storybooks and speaking development. The findings are expected to contribute practical implications for early childhood educators seeking to optimize the use of picture storybooks as a medium for enhancing children's speaking skills.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at describing and understanding the teacher strategies used in enhancing early childhood speaking skills through picture storybooks at Group B of TK Islam Yaroja, Jeruk Manis Village. A qualitative approach was selected as the most appropriate design for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of naturalistic classroom processes, teacher perspectives, and contextual factors that shape the implementation of picture storybook-based speaking activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike experimental studies that measure causal effects through controlled variables, this descriptive qualitative design sought to capture the richness and complexity of how teachers strategically utilize picture storybooks in authentic early childhood classroom settings and how children respond to these strategies over time. This design is particularly suited for educational research that aims to understand the "how" and "why" of pedagogical practices rather than merely quantifying their outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

This research was conducted at TK Islam Yaroja, located in Jeruk Manis Village, during the academic year 2025–2026, with data collection taking place in September 2025. TK Islam Yaroja is a kindergarten institution that integrates Islamic values into its early childhood education curriculum, with a particular emphasis on developing children's language abilities and character from an early age. The participants of this study were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the learning process under investigation. The primary informants consisted of one classroom teacher of Group B, Ibu Zulfiana, who served as the key informant regarding the implementation of picture storybook-based teaching strategies, and the school principal, Ibu Meriyanti, S.Pd SD, who provided institutional perspectives on the school's support for the use of picture storybooks as a learning medium. Additionally, 20 children of Group B aged 5–6 years participated as the observed subjects whose speaking development was monitored throughout the study. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected participants could provide the most relevant and information-rich data pertaining to the research objectives (Patton, 2015).

2.3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three complementary techniques to ensure comprehensive and credible findings: observation, interviews, and documentation. First, non-participant

observations were conducted systematically over six classroom meetings to monitor children's speaking development and to document the teacher's implementation of picture storybook-based strategies during learning activities. During each observation session, the researcher recorded the teacher's instructional techniques, children's verbal responses and participation levels, and the overall classroom dynamics using a structured observation checklist. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key informants: the classroom teacher, Ibu Zulfiana, on September 9, 2025, and the school principal, Ibu Meriyanti, S.Pd SD, on September 8, 2025. The interviews aimed to gain in-depth insights into the rationale behind the selection of picture storybooks as a learning medium, the specific strategies employed during implementation, and the perceived supporting and inhibiting factors encountered in the learning process. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing follow-up questions while maintaining focus on the research objectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Third, documentation was collected in the form of lesson plans, photographs of learning activities, and children's speaking development assessment records to supplement and corroborate the data obtained from observations and interviews.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which comprises three concurrent and iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, the raw data from observation field notes, interview transcripts, and collected documents were carefully selected, simplified, abstracted, and organized according to the research focus areas, namely teacher strategies, children's speaking development, and supporting and inhibiting factors. In the data display stage, the condensed data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions and categorical matrices to facilitate systematic pattern identification. Children's speaking abilities were categorized based on the developmental assessment indicators established by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, comprising four categories: undeveloped (Belum Berkembang/BB), beginning to develop (Mulai Berkembang/MB), developed as expected (Berkembang Sesuai Harapan/BSH), and very well developed (Berkembang Sangat Baik/BSB). Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the recurring patterns identified across the data sources and were verified through methodological triangulation cross-checking the consistency between what the teacher reported in interviews, what was observed during classroom practice, and what was documented in the children's developmental assessment records to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This triangulation process strengthened the internal validity of the study by confirming that the teacher strategies described in the interviews were consistently reflected in the observed classroom practices and the documented developmental outcomes of the children.

3. Results

The findings of this study are presented based on data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, organized into three main themes: teacher strategies in utilizing picture storybooks, children's speaking development outcomes, and supporting and inhibiting factors.

3.1. Teacher Strategies in Utilizing Picture Storybooks

Interview data from the classroom teacher of Group B, Ibu Zulfiana, revealed that picture storybooks were deliberately selected as the primary instructional medium for language learning activities. The teacher reported that picture storybooks were chosen due to their capacity to attract children's attention and facilitate their comprehension of story content through the integration of visual and textual elements. Specifically, the teacher implemented three interconnected strategies during the learning process: interactive reading, question-and-answer activities, and story retelling. During interactive reading sessions, the teacher read picture storybooks aloud while simultaneously displaying the illustrations to the children,

using expressive intonation and gestures to maintain engagement. The teacher explained that "in every learning activity, children are given the opportunity to answer questions, identify story characters, and retell the story content using simple language." According to the teacher, this combination of strategies was particularly effective in building children's confidence and fluency in speaking, especially for those who were previously passive during classroom activities.

The interview with the school principal, Ibu Meriyanti, S.Pd SD, corroborated the teacher's account and provided additional institutional context. The principal confirmed that the school administration actively supported the use of picture storybooks as a language learning medium, stating that this approach aligned with the school's vision of developing children's language abilities and character from an early age. Furthermore, the principal noted that "the school provides age-appropriate picture storybooks and grants teachers the freedom to develop creative and innovative learning strategies." This institutional support created a conducive environment for the sustained implementation of picture storybook-based teaching strategies.

3.2. Children's Speaking Development Outcomes

Observation data collected over six classroom meetings demonstrated a progressive improvement in children's speaking abilities. Children who were initially reluctant and lacked confidence in speaking gradually became more active in answering the teacher's questions, identifying story characters, and retelling story content. The developmental trajectory observed across the six meetings indicated that children's verbal participation increased as they became more familiar with the interactive reading routines and gained confidence through repeated practice.

The quantitative summary of children's speaking development at the conclusion of the observation period is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Children's Speaking Development Categories (N=20)

Development Category	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
Developed as Expected (BSH)	10	50%
Beginning to Develop (MB)	8	40%
Undeveloped (BB)	2	10%
Total	20	100%

As shown in Table 1, the majority of children (50%) achieved the developed as expected category, indicating that they were able to express opinions verbally, respond to questions about story content, and retell stories with adequate coherence and confidence. Eight children (40%) were categorized as beginning to develop, demonstrating emerging speaking abilities with occasional prompting from the teacher. Only two children (10%) remained in the undeveloped category, suggesting that these children required more intensive and individualized support. Notably, of the 12 children who were initially categorized as undeveloped at the beginning of the study, 10 children showed improvement, progressing into the beginning to develop and developed as expected categories, representing an 83.3% improvement rate.

3.3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Based on the triangulation of interview, observation, and documentation data, several supporting and inhibiting factors were identified in the implementation of picture storybook-based teaching strategies. The supporting factors included: the visual appeal of picture storybooks that sustained children's interest and engagement throughout the learning activities; the teacher's creativity and competence in delivering interactive and dialogic reading sessions; institutional support from the school administration in providing age-appropriate learning resources; and the conducive classroom environment that encouraged children's active verbal participation. The inhibiting factors comprised: individual differences in children's characteristics, particularly varying levels of confidence and language readiness; limited concentration spans among some children during extended reading activities; and the restricted availability of diverse picture storybook collections that could provide variety across

multiple learning sessions. This finding aligns with Justice and Pullen (2003), who emphasized that access to diverse and high-quality print materials is essential for creating literacy-rich environments that support children's language and speaking development.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that teacher strategies incorporating interactive reading, question-and-answer activities, and story retelling through picture storybooks effectively enhanced children's speaking skills at Group B of TK Islam Yaroja. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that language development occurs through meaningful social interactions between children and more knowledgeable others. In this context, the teacher functioned as a mediator who scaffolded children's speaking abilities by providing structured opportunities for verbal expression through picture storybook-based activities. This scaffolding process reflects Bruner's (1983) concept of the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), in which adults facilitate children's language development through structured and supportive interactions. The interactive reading strategy, in which the teacher engaged children in dialogic exchanges about the story content, reflects the principles of dialogic reading extensively advocated by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), who demonstrated that adult-child interactive reading significantly enhances children's expressive language outcomes.

The progressive improvement observed in children's speaking development across six meetings supports the notion that sustained and consistent exposure to language-rich activities is essential for verbal skill acquisition in early childhood. The finding that 10 out of 12 initially undeveloped children showed improvement is consistent with the meta-analytic findings of Mol and Bus (2011), who reported that shared reading interventions using picture storybooks produced moderate to large effects on children's oral language skills. Similarly, Wasik and Bond (2001) found that interactive book reading programs in preschool classrooms significantly enhanced children's vocabulary and verbal expression when teachers employed structured questioning and extended dialogue during reading sessions. The effectiveness of question-and-answer activities in stimulating children's verbal responses corroborates the findings of Zucker et al. (2013), who established that open-ended questioning during shared reading sessions significantly increased children's verbal output and complexity of language production. Furthermore, the story retelling strategy provided children with opportunities to practice narrative construction, which Sipe (2008) identified as a critical component of oral language development that strengthens children's ability to organize thoughts and express them coherently. This finding is further supported by Isbell et al. (2004), who demonstrated that story retelling activities significantly improved the oral language complexity and story comprehension of young children compared to passive listening alone.

The identification of both supporting and inhibiting factors in this study provides a nuanced understanding of the contextual conditions that influence the effectiveness of picture storybook-based teaching strategies. The finding that institutional support and teacher competence served as critical supporting factors is consistent with Mulyasa's (2012) assertion that the success of instructional strategies depends on the synergistic interaction among three primary components: the teacher, the learning environment, and the learners. The inhibiting factors identified, particularly individual differences in children's confidence levels and concentration spans, suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach may be insufficient and that teachers need to incorporate differentiated strategies to accommodate diverse learner needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Bredekamp (2017) reinforced this view by advocating for developmentally appropriate practices that consider individual children's strengths, interests, and developmental levels when designing instructional activities in early childhood education settings. The limited availability of picture storybook collections also highlights the need for sustained investment in early childhood learning resources, particularly in rural educational settings where access to diverse instructional media may be constrained.

Despite these promising findings, this study acknowledges several limitations. As a qualitative study conducted in a single kindergarten with a relatively small number of participants, the findings are context-specific and may not be directly generalizable to other settings. Future research could employ larger-scale mixed-methods designs to examine the effectiveness of picture storybook-based strategies across diverse early childhood education contexts and to establish more robust evidence regarding the causal relationship between specific teacher strategies and children's speaking development outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that teacher strategies utilizing picture storybooks specifically interactive reading, question-and-answer activities, and story retelling effectively enhanced the speaking skills of children aged 5-6 years at Group B of TK Islam Yaroja. Observation data over six meetings demonstrated that 10 out of 12 children who were initially categorized as undeveloped showed significant improvement, with the majority progressing into the developing and developed as expected categories. The success of these strategies was supported by the visual appeal of picture storybooks, the teacher's instructional competence, and the institutional support provided by the school administration.

The study also identified inhibiting factors, including individual differences in children's confidence levels, limited concentration spans, and the restricted availability of diverse picture storybook collections. These findings underscore the importance of differentiated instructional approaches and sustained investment in learning resources to optimize speaking development outcomes. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of the processual dimensions of teacher strategies within a rural Indonesian kindergarten context, offering contextually grounded insights that complement the predominantly quantitative literature on picture storybooks and early childhood language development.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Teachers are encouraged to diversify their picture storybook-based strategies by incorporating additional techniques such as role-playing, puppet-assisted storytelling, and peer-to-peer retelling to accommodate varying levels of children's speaking readiness. School administrators should allocate resources for expanding picture storybook collections and providing professional development opportunities for teachers in dialogic reading techniques. Future researchers are recommended to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies across multiple kindergarten settings to strengthen the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of picture storybook-based strategies in enhancing early childhood speaking skills. Furthermore, Dickinson and Tabors (2001) highlighted the importance of home-school partnerships in language development; therefore, schools should consider involving parents in shared reading practices to reinforce children's speaking skills beyond the classroom setting.

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