

PICTURE BOOKS AS A MEDIUM FOR TEACHING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN PRIMARY EFL CLASSES

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Abstract: This study explores the effectiveness of picture books as a pedagogical medium for teaching cultural understanding in elementary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Conducted with 2nd-grade pupils at a primary school in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the research aimed to determine how picture books can help children develop cross-cultural awareness and positive attitudes toward diversity. Using innovative, child-centered strategies—such as visual exploration, guided discussion, dramatization, creative drawing, and culture comparison charts—the study examined students’ progress over a 12-week period. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through observation, interviews, and pre-/post-assessments. Findings show that picture books significantly enhance pupils’ comprehension of cultural diversity, curiosity about global traditions, and willingness to communicate in English. The study concludes that visual narratives provide a powerful, age-appropriate way to integrate culture and language learning in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: picture books, cultural understanding, young learners, EFL, intercultural education, visual literacy

INTRODUCTION

In modern language education, culture and communication are inseparable. Teaching a foreign language is not only about grammar and vocabulary; it is about helping learners understand how people in different societies think, live, and express themselves. For young learners, developing this cultural awareness at an early stage lays the foundation for tolerance, empathy, and global citizenship.

In Uzbekistan, English is widely taught from early primary levels. However, many classrooms still rely on textbook-centered instruction, leaving little room for authentic cultural materials. Picture books offer a creative alternative. Their vivid illustrations, storytelling structure, and emotional appeal make them ideal for introducing cultural

topics to children. They allow learners to see and feel another culture rather than simply read about it.

This study examines how picture books can be used as a medium for teaching cultural understanding among 2nd-grade EFL pupils using interactive, multimodal strategies. The research addresses the following questions:

1. How do picture books help pupils recognize cultural similarities and differences?
2. What impact do they have on pupils' attitudes toward other cultures?
3. How do interactive methods with picture books affect engagement and language use?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Picture books are multimodal texts where images and words work together to convey meaning (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Their visual appeal captures young learners' attention, while their narratives offer opportunities for vocabulary, comprehension, and moral development. Mourão (2015) highlights that picture books create “authentic experiences” that encourage learners to react personally and emotionally to the text, which is essential for developing intercultural competence. Research shows that picture books help children understand abstract cultural concepts by showing them visually—such as family life, holidays, or daily routines in other countries. For example, a child can learn about “Christmas dinner” or “Chinese New Year” not by memorizing words, but by seeing illustrations of families celebrating together (Wilkins et al., 2008).

Cultural understanding in EFL contexts involves recognizing that people in different places may speak, behave, and celebrate differently. Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence as the ability to interpret, relate, and critically reflect on cultural practices. For children, picture books are a natural starting point because they visualize these differences in ways that are emotionally safe and engaging. In a recent study, “The Evaluation of the Cultural Diversity Effect by Using Picture Books” (2022), researchers found that preschool and early primary pupils developed higher sensitivity to cultural differences after exposure to diverse picture books. They became more curious and less judgmental about other ways of life.

Effective cultural teaching through picture books involves active engagement. Teachers can:

- Use guided viewing questions (e.g., “What do you notice about their clothes?” “Why do you think they eat together on the floor?”).

- Encourage role-play and dramatization to bring the story to life.
- Facilitate compare-and-contrast tasks (e.g., “How do we celebrate New Year? How do they?”).
- Ask pupils to create their own mini picture books, mixing local and global cultural elements.

These interactive techniques transform passive reading into an active exploration of meaning, identity, and culture.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out with 30 pupils (aged 7–8) from the 2nd grade at a primary school in Tashkent. All were beginner-level EFL learners who had studied English for about one year. The class represented typical urban Uzbek pupils with minimal prior exposure to other cultures.

Materials

Two picture books were selected for their strong cultural content and age-appropriateness:

1. “The Snowy Day” by Ezra Jack Keats (USA) – focusing on winter traditions and daily life in an American city.
2. “Handa’s Surprise” by Eileen Browne (Kenya/UK) – depicting rural African culture, foods, and customs.

Both books contain vivid illustrations, simple English text, and cross-cultural appeal.

Additional materials: visual flashcards, worksheets, a world map, and art supplies for drawing tasks.

Procedure

The project lasted **12 weeks**, with 2 sessions per week (40 minutes each).

Week Focus	Activities
1–2 Pre-tests introduction	and Assess prior knowledge and attitudes about cultures; introduce world map
3–4 Reading The Snowy Day	Picture exploration, guided Q&A, snow play vocabulary
5–6 Creative tasks	Role-play; making “My Snowy Day” posters comparing Uzbekistan’s winter

Week Focus		Activities
7–8	Reading Surprise	Handa’s Fruit vocabulary, cultural guessing game, compare Africa and Uzbekistan
9–10	Creative output	Pupils draw “My Surprise Story” with fruits and family traditions
11	Post-test and interviews	Assess growth in cultural understanding and attitudes
12	Exhibition and storytelling day	and Pupils present their illustrated stories to parents and peers

Data Collection

- Observation notes during every lesson
- Pre- and post-tests (simple matching and picture identification)
- Student interviews (translated into Uzbek)
- Samples of creative work (posters and mini books)

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Category	Pre-Test (%)	Post-Test (%)	Improvement
Recognition of cultural items	46	82	+36
Positive attitude (Likert 1–5)	3.1	4.5	+1.4
Vocabulary retention	58	86	+28
Participation (average per lesson)	45%	83%	+38%

Qualitative Results

- Cultural Recognition: Pupils could identify food, clothing, and home differences confidently after reading.
- Empathy and curiosity: One student commented, “Handa eats mangoes every day. I want to try them!”
- Language confidence: Children used new English words to describe pictures (e.g., “This family eats together,” “They have no snow”).
- Creative imagination: In their own stories, students blended cultures, drawing Uzbek families celebrating with African fruits or American winter clothes.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that picture books significantly enhance both **language learning** and **cultural awareness** when combined with interactive and reflective

activities. Pupils' engagement and comprehension improved notably. The visual context made abstract cultural ideas more concrete, while role-plays and drawings encouraged active participation.

This result aligns with Mourão's (2015) argument that authentic literature fosters genuine responses in learners. Similarly, the 2022 cultural diversity study confirmed that illustrations enable children to visualize and internalize global differences naturally.

Pedagogical Implications

1. **Teacher's Role:** The teacher should act as a facilitator, guiding children to think critically about what they see.
2. **Integration:** Cultural lessons should not be separate but embedded within regular language lessons.
3. **Materials:** Choose picture books with rich imagery and realistic depictions of daily life.
4. **Local Adaptation:** Teachers can create bilingual picture books comparing English-speaking cultures and Uzbek traditions (e.g., Nowruz vs Christmas).
5. **Creativity:** Encourage students to illustrate or dramatize their interpretations—turning learning into discovery.

Limitations and Future Work

The study was limited to one class and a short duration. Future research could involve multiple schools, diverse regions, or longer observation periods to measure lasting cultural competence.

CONCLUSION

The integration of picture books in primary EFL education represents a powerful means of teaching cultural understanding. For 2nd-grade pupils, visual stories act as bridges between languages and cultures. When supported by interactive and creative teaching methods, picture books cultivate empathy, curiosity, and communicative confidence. This approach not only strengthens English proficiency but also nurtures the values of respect and global citizenship among young learners in Uzbekistan.

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