Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

Enhancing EFL Competence via Mediation: A Vygotskian Approach with a Focus on Picture Books

Zhiqing Zhong[1,a,*]

[1]*Economics and Business, University College of London, London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom*
a. zzhiqing02@gmail.com
**corresponding author*

Abstract: As globalization accelerates, the value of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has increased notably. In recent years, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has been widely employed in EFL teaching, establishing itself as a core framework for instructional practice. As a result, the paper investigates how the key concepts of SCT are used in EFL teaching and demonstrates, through specific cases, their effectiveness in enhancing language proficiency. In particular, it focuses on the application of picture books as an innovative cultural tool in language input, cultural understanding, and emotional development. The results indicate that picture books, with their multimodal forms (such as text, images, and design),effectively boost students' language input, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding. While research highlights the significance of picture books in reading comprehension and vocabulary, their impact on speaking and writing remains underexplored. Teachers should leverage the multiple functions of picture books and apply specific teaching strategies to enhance students' overall language proficiency. In addition, more attention should be given to the specific applications and practical strategies for using picture books in speaking and writing instruction.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Sociocultural Theory, Mediation, Picture Books

1. Introduction

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which serves as a foundation for understanding language acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, emphasized the importance of social interaction, guidance, and support before learners can independently learn. And core concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), mediation, and cultural tools can provide valuable perspectives for the design and implementation of EFL curricula. The concept of ZPD suggests that language learning should focus on the learner's potential, with collaborative activities being key to the learning process [1,2]. There are three forms of mediation that facilitate language acquisition [3,4]. In particular, teachers should act as facilitators, employing effective scaffolding strategies to enhance learner learning, such as encouraging learners to think via the use of well-crafted questions [5,6]. In addition, peer-mediated interaction plays an active role in the development of language, social skills, and emotions [7]. The integration of cultural tools in EFL education plays a crucial role in enhancing the learning experience, such as digital tools, course books, and picture books [3,8,9,10]. Therefore, the paper aims to explore how picture books, as an innovative cultural tool, can be effectively utilized

© 2025 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

in EFL courses. Through a review of relevant literature, it analyzes the application of picture books in EFL education and the challenges that they face. Picture books, as mediating tools, help enhance language input, cultural understanding, and emotional development [8,10]. The integration of picture books with other cultural tools contributes to stimulating learners' motivation and optimizing their learning experience. Therefore, exploring the application of picture books in EFL courses holds significant theoretical and practical value.

2. The Application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in EFL Education

2.1. The Zone of Proximal Development in the Context of EFL

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is based on his understanding of human uniqueness, which is the ability to learn and teach one another through communication [1]. He believed that language is the most powerful cultural tool for establishing connections between individuals, the world, and self-reflection. One of the key factors in language learning is social interaction, where meaning is co-constructed through collaborative activities. The concept of ZPD suggests that learners can reach higher levels of understanding by learning alongside more knowledgeable others (MKO) [1]. In the EFL context, MKOs can be teachers, peers, or other tools that support language learning. Moreover, Vygotsky proposed that good learning should go beyond the current developmental level, focusing on the learner's potential [1]. Nevertheless, even among children of the same age, there may be differences in their ZPD. As a result, EFL teachers must understand the dynamics of the ZPD to effectively design collaborative activities that align with the learner's potential. For example, teachers can pair students based on their strengths, with one student excelling in research and the other in speaking. This collaborative learning provides opportunities for peer teaching. Many studies has demonstrated that combining ZPD with scaffolding strategies helps facilitate language acquisition. For instance, implementing instructional scaffolding and peer scaffolding during the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading stages helps enhance learners' reading comprehension skills [2].

2.2. Mediation in EFL Learning

Another fundamental concept of SCT is the mediation of the mind, which posits that individuals rely on tools to establish connections with the world. These tools are deliberately selected and utilized to accomplish specific objectives. These tools serve as mediators between the subject and the object [1,3]. In the context of EFL, mediation is defined as the process by which learners utilize cultural tools to address challenges or attain the objective of foreign language acquisition. More precisely, mediation among EFL learners can be systematically categorized into three forms: intrapersonal dialogue, interpersonal dialogue, and interaction facilitated by cultural tools [4].

Mediation through self-dialogue is based on Vygotsky's theory of cultural development, which explains that cognitive processes progress from a social level to an individual level through the transformation of social speech into inner speech [4]. This concept highlights how learners engage in internal communication, where they organize their thoughts and mentally articulate the steps and strategies required to complete tasks. To encourage self-dialogue, teachers can guide learners to reflect on their task completion process. For instance, they might prompt students to consider alternative approaches or improvements they could make if given another opportunity to tackle the task. These reflective practices help learners structure their reasoning, facilitating the transition from social speech to inner speech. This process supports the development and internalization of knowledge. Other forms of mediation, including interactions with teachers and peers as well as the use of cultural tools, will be explored in the following sections.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

3. The Classification and Application of Mediation Methods

3.1. Teacher-mediated Interaction

In the era of globalization, the role of a language teacher should no longer be simplified as helping learners achieve linguistic competence. An EFL teacher should be seen as a facilitator who guides learners in developing their interpersonal and communication skills throughout the language learning process [5]. As a facilitator, the EFL teacher should be able to promote autonomy among learners, taking into the account the set of skills they need in the future, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. In addition, a facilitator should undertake instructional approach for learners to engage in problem solving and collaborative tasks, allowing them to use language in context or targeting real world problems.

Another key role of a facilitator is to effectively use various teaching techniques and implement appropriate pedagogical scaffolding to support learning within learners' ZPD. For example, the use of instructional scaffolding strategies prior, during and after the activity promotes learners' reading comprehension [2]. For instance, conducting a picture walk before reading a story helps learners make predictions and activate their prior knowledge or experiences. During reading, teachers should explain causality that might cause confusion. Post-reading discussions encourage learners to share their understanding, thus enhancing comprehension. In an EFL classroom, it is essential for teachers to promote two key forms of interaction: teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions. Teachers create interactions by asking questions to ascertain whether learners understand and remember what has been taught and how they apply [6]. It is suggested that features of effective questions should include clarity, interest, learning value, availability and extension. This questioning strategy can be applied in individual, pair, or whole-class settings. And effective questioning encourages greater student participation, enabling teachers to assess learners' ZPD and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly.

3.2. Peer-Mediated Interaction

Learning is the meaning-making process through collaborative experiences, peer collaboration is an essential one. The most common forms of peer interaction are learner-learner (in pairs) and learner-learners (in small groups) [7]. To accomplish tasks together or evaluate and provide feedback on each other's work, learners practice and share their understanding of the language. In other words, they are interpreting and using the language. Allowing more knowledgeable learners to reflect their understanding and reading techniques help their peer(s) to achieve better reading comprehension [2]. While most research emphasizes the impact of peer collaboration on linguistic development, social and emotional aspects should also be considered [7]. Besides, peer support involves attributes such as encouragement and compassion toward those receiving help, and the helper also benefits from the interaction, as it fosters a sense of value and purpose in their role.

Previously, a study investigated whether peer dialogue and peer support could facilitate learning opportunities [7]. And six pairs of EFL learners with similar language proficiency were asked to complete a range of tasks and exercises, including listening activities from a video and writing a similar dialogue for presentation. The study categorized the types of support as linguistic, cognitive, socio-emotional, and requests for assistance. Learners checked and shared their understanding of language knowledge, task procedures, and content. They encouraged their partners to participate and provided support when a partner appeared hesitant to continue. Additionally, learners sought information, clarification, and confirmation throughout the collaborative process.

To motivate and enhance learners' language acquisition, teachers should encourage forms of peer interaction, both learner-learner and learner-learners. For example, teachers can ask pairs of students

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

to answer questions together [7]. Role-playing activities allow students to engage with the language in real-life contexts, such as ordering food. Writing the dialogue and performing it encourages students to research, construct, and present their knowledge in the target language. Furthermore, peer teaching and feedback are practical methods for engaging learners more deeply with the materials and fostering critical thinking.

3.3. Cultural Tools

In an EFL context, cultural tools are aimed at the practical application of English, such as digital tools, coursebooks, and picture books. First, digital tools expand learners' potential by giving them access to more resources and supporting mediation through dialogue with themselves, peers, and teachers. And multimedia networking fosters an interactive social environment that promotes peer collaboration and strengthens communicative competence. For example, learners can complete tasks using Google Docs and share learning materials via Google Drive. Teachers can use digital portfolios on tablets to monitor students' work and progress, hence enabling learners to review this information and reflect on areas that need improvement or revision. In addition, digital tools boost personalized learning experiences and create opportunities for self-directed learning. And adaptive learning platforms analyze learners' performance and tailor lessons based on individual progress and proficiency levels. The digital pen is one of the most popular technological devices designed to support children's reading by linking text to pronunciation [8]. When used with coursebooks and picture books, learners can tap the digital pen on specific words to hear their pronunciation and repeat them. Digital pens with native speaker recordings are particularly beneficial for improving listening and speaking fluency. Second, coursebooks are the widely utilized cultural tool in EFL instruction, particularly for specific purposes [9]. They serve as essential resources for both teachers and learners. A well-designed coursebook saves teachers time on planning, enabling them to focus on facilitating learning via monitoring, assessment, and scaffolding. Additionally, teachers benefit from engaging with the materials themselves, which enhances their understanding of how these resources support language learning. The effectiveness of coursebooks in EFL was examined from both teachers' and learners' perspectives [9]. Learners reported greater satisfaction, highlighting the coursebook's role in enhancing their skills in multiple areas. However, teachers highlighted that the coursebook did not adequately prioritize visual elements, which are essential for engaging students and encouraging their use of the book as a language acquisition tool. Other valuable resources, such as picture books, cartoons, and dramas, are widely used in EFL learning [10]. In particular, picture books have gained significance in recent years due to their ability to integrate engaging illustrations with advanced vocabulary and sentence structures, enriching the learning experience [8].

4. Picture Books as an Innovative Mediation Tool: Application and Challenges

4.1. The Functions of Picture Book

Picture books are a multilayered form of literature that constructs narratives through the interplay of written language, visual imagery, and graphic design, with each imparting meaning distinctly. And the integration of text, images and layout enhances the overall narrative experience, where both verbal and non-verbal systems complement each other in the meaning-making process [10]. The combination of illustrations and text helps learners connect words with their meanings, enhancing their understanding of the language. Also, picture books serve as a crucial foundation for language input, cultural understanding and emotional development, particularly in EFL settings. Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental for mastering a language, one problem learners have is that the lack of practical usage scenarios [8]. Stories from books help expand their vocabularies qualitatively in a interactive and cultural context. For example, Eric Carle's classic picture book *The Very Hungry*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

Caterpillar helps children learn the names of colors, foods, and days of the week, illustrating the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. In this process, children not only acquire specific vocabulary but understand the practical use and cultural context of these words in an interactive storytelling experience.

In addition, picture books are windows into different cultures and experiences, exposing children to a wide range of perspectives, traditions and lifestyles. Books such as *Long-Long's New Year* by Hezi Hong and *Dr. Seuss's How The Grinch Lost Christmas* by Alastair Heim introduce children to different festivals worldwide, from the Chinese New Year to Christmas. These narratives encourage children to recognize both the differences and similarities among people, hence promoting a deeper understanding of the world around them. Furthermore, picture books play a significant role in developing emotional literacy, aiding learners in understanding their feelings and establishing their self-identity. For instance, Ed Emberley's *Go Away Big Green Monster* connects emotions to colors in a way that resonates easily with learners. Similarly, Tom Percival's *Perfectly Norman* addresses themes of self-identity and self acceptance, providing a platform for children to discuss their own emotions and personal challenges.

4.2. Specific Strategies for Implementing Picture Books

In order to effectively applying picture books into EFL curriculum and design interactive sessions during classes, teachers should understand the four types of relationships between texts and images: symmetrical, complementary, expanding, and counterpointing [10]. For preschool and elementary learners, the emphasis is typically on the first two types, where the text and images convey the same or complementary meanings. Teachers can boost students' reading experience through scaffolding strategies before, during, and after reading, along with supplementary materials and activities.

In the pre-reading phase, EFL teachers often utilize techniques such as picture walks to activate learners' prior knowledge related to the theme and target vocabularies while encouraging them to make predictions. This assists learners in making connections between the text and images, as well as between the story and their personal experiences, thereby enhancing memory and comprehension [10]. Also, songs, videos and games can capture learners' attention and stimulate their motivation and interest in reading [8]. Collaborative singing and games not only engage learners emotionally but also promote peer interaction, providing opportunities for expression and communication. In the process of reading the picture book, teachers can ask focused questions about vocabulary, facts, and time to assess students' comprehension and language skills. And these questions can also serve to activate learners' prior knowledge and personal experiences. Encouraging students to turn the pages while reading enhances engagement and strengthens the connection between the story and their own lives. Meanwhile, using props or physical objects for story retelling can help deepen vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. For example, in teaching *The Color Monster by Anna Lienas*, teachers can incorporate role-playing and art-based activities to enhance understanding. Students can act out different colored monsters representing various emotions, allowing them to express their feelings. Through creative art activities, students can design their own monsters and link emotions to colors, reflecting their individual interpretations and understanding of the story.

The selection of picture books is as critical as the teaching strategies employed, especially for young learners with limited language accumulation. Teachers must balance the learners' interests with the difficulty level to ensure the material is both engaging and appropriately challenging [8]. The ZPD theory suggests that materials should match learners' potential, avoiding content that is too easy or difficult, as misalignment can reduce motivation and engagement.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

4.3. The Challenges of Applying Picture Books in EFL Curricula

Despite the crucial role picture books play in EFL teaching, teachers face challenges in integrating them into the curriculum. Firstly, while many studies highlight the influence of picture books on enhancing vocabulary and reading comprehension, few address their contributions to and practical strategies for applying them to other language skills, such as speaking and writing. Picture books offer meaningful language input that supports vocabulary development and reading comprehension, particularly when supplemented with additional materials [8,10]. However, there is a relative lack of research on the effects and strategies related to other essential language skills, such as speaking and writing. To develop EFL competence, all language skills must be addressed. Secondly, teachers may face obstacles in integrating picture books into the curriculum due to limited knowledge and understanding. Picture books are complex entities that combine text, illustrations, and layout, with interwoven relationships among these elements. Without a clear understanding of their structure, effective teaching may be hindered. A typical picture book includes elements such as the cover, endpapers, title page, contents pages, back endpapers, and back cover, each serving a specific function that contributes to the overall narrative. For example, the endpapers and back endpapers can reinforce the main themes of the story (as seen in *Pezzettino* by Leo Lionni), suggest alternative endings (as in *The Tunnel* by Anthony Browne), or provide insights into the main characters (as in *My Dad and My Mum* by Anthony Browne). In some cases, such as *Hildilid's Night* by Cheli Duran Ryan, a holistic understanding requires examining both the cover and the back cover simultaneously. Additionally, researching the backgrounds of authors and illustrators can deepen our understanding of the narrative. For instance, Leo Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow* is not just a simple story about colors, but also explores themes of self-identity and acceptance, with many of his other works similarly addressing the question of "Who am I?". Thus, it is crucial for EFL teachers to receive more training to enhance their understanding of picture books, allowing them to integrate these valuable cultural tools into the curriculum and promote effective language learning.

5. Conclusion

The results highlight the pivotal role of picture books as an innovative cultural tool in EFL teaching. Picture books not only help expand learners' vocabulary and enhance cultural awareness but also promote emotional development and improve reading comprehension. Through engaging narratives, picture books spark learners' interest in reading and encourage them to explore further literary resources. In addition, effective teacher guidance, peer interaction, and the strategic use of cultural tools collectively provide a richer learning experience for learners. However, there are limitations. While it examines the potential of picture books in EFL education, it does not fully explore their application in other language skills, such as speaking and writing. Future research should focus on how picture books can enhance speaking and writing skills, exploring specific teaching strategies for these areas. Furthermore, to maximize the teaching potential of picture books, continuous professional development for EFL teachers is crucial. Future efforts should focus on further training teachers to effectively integrate picture books into their teaching practices, enhancing their overall teaching abilities.

References

[1] *Silalahi, R. (2019) Understanding Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development for Learning. Polyglot: Jurnal Ilmiah, 15(2): 169-186.*

[2] *Yawiloeng, R. (2022) Using instructional scaffolding and multimodal texts to enhance reading comprehension: Perceptions and attitudes of EFL students. SSRN Electronic Journal, 18: 877-894.*

[3] *Huong, L.P.H. and Hung, B.P. (2021) Mediation of digital tools in English learning LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network, 14(2): 512-528*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.21110

[4] *Nithideechaiwarachok, B., Chano, J. and Wu, C.C. (2024) Socio-Cultural and Social Constructivist Theories and Its Application in EFL Classroom for Thai Pre-Service Teachers: A Review for Further Research. International Journal of Language Education, 8(3): 564-572*

[5] *Karmi, K. (2019) The EFL teacher: A cultural mediator and a facilitator. Journal of Education and Practice, 10(17): 61-64.*

[6] *Fatmawati, E., Rahman, A.Q. and Mahmud, M. (2020) Teacher's questioning strategies in EFL classroom interaction. Exposure: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris, 9(1): 59-72.*

[7] *Kos, T. (2023) Exploring peer support among young learners during regular EFL classroom lessons. International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 33(2), 169-189.*

[8] *Sun, C. (2022) Enhancing Picture Book Reading for EFL Young Learners. Education Reform and Development, 4(2): 1-7.*

[9] *Iswati, L. (2019) Developing ADDIE model-based ESP coursework. Indonesian EFL Journal, 5(2): 103-112.*

[10] *Shen, S. and Huang, T. (2021) The complex effects of picturebooks on English as a foreign language reading. International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, 10(5): 68-79.*