



## INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH PICTURE BOOKS ON EFL LEARNERS' ANXIETY IN TAIWAN

Pei-Ling Yang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for General Education, Oriental Institute of Technology, Taiwan

Email: [peiling1225@hotmail.com](mailto:peiling1225@hotmail.com)



### ABSTRACT

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English picture books have been claimed to raise EFL learners' learning motivation and to promote independent learning and thinking. However, there is little research focusing on the effect of English picture books on tertiary learners. The study involved 25 participants; the study time was one-semester long. The instruments for the study were a set of questionnaires related to learners' background, perception and attitude attempting to examine respondents' attitude towards English picture books and language learning anxiety. Each participant was required to read English picture books during the class and after reading; they had to write down feedback or thoughts. On-site teacher observation and post-interviews were also conducted after the study. The findings showed a difference in language learning anxiety. They felt less anxious and more confident in learning English. This study results provide evidence that English picture books play an influencing role lowering the EFL learners' language anxiety and enhancing positive attitude towards English learning. It is suggested that English picture books can serve as good learning resources for low-proficient EFL adult learners.

**Contribution/Originality:** Previous studies have although focused on picture books and young learners; however, in this current study, college learners' learning anxiety is the focus to examine how picture books can reduce this anxiety particularly in an EFL context and that of learners with low-proficiency.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English education in Taiwan has been highly emphasized for decades. Besides taking formal English courses, most English language learners in Taiwan spend extra time taking English courses even after school. The primary purpose of studying English courses beyond curriculum is to gain higher scores for English tests. English test scores, in Taiwan, are an evidence of the awareness and appreciation of the target language's cultures and communicative abilities. However, most students of English in Taiwan tend to learn English through memorization or rote techniques. Grammar-based approaches are also widely applied in a second or foreign language classroom, especially in an Asian environment (Wei *et al.*, 2015). Some educators have incorporated various sorts of teaching methods into language curricula; however, there is still little research focusing on the benefits or possibility of children literature or picture books for adolescents and adult English language learners.

For adolescents and adult English language learners, they have learned English for many years. If they do not have encouraging or satisfying learning experiences, they may easily lock themselves in the room of despair and hopelessness. It then will be extremely difficult to take this kind of learners to a promising place with better learning enjoyment and confidence. In a high-tensed and score-focused environment, the learners feel anxious.

They learn the target language for competing with their peers or showing that they are good students. In a traditional English classroom, a lecture-based and teacher-dominated method is commonly seen. Unfortunately, this kind of learning context does not help low-proficient college learners learn more or learn better. On the contrary, it may decrease their learning passion or motivation.

However, a more learner-centered and process-focused environment can encourage more learning and lower learner anxiety. Anxiety impedes learning process and outcomes (Aydin, 2008). Especially for low-proficient learners, reading materials are one of the main keys influencing their willingness to continue learning. Typically, a course book is available for all learners during class time. It is frustrating for low-proficient learners when they cannot comprehend or understand the contents. English picture books contain easy-to-comprehend texts and illustrated images; they can bring adult learners back to the childhood time. At the same time, the learners enjoy stories and absorb English knowledge. English-picture-book-incorporated contexts provide learners with freedom to select materials they like to read on their own. They interact with the reading itself; they have a voice to speak out or write down without being judged or scored by the so-called standards.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to investigate the role that English picture books play in reducing EFL college learners' learning anxiety and about their perception of English picture books for learning purposes.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Literature is language, and children's language grows through experience with literature," was claimed by Cullinan (1989). Reading literature is a sophisticated activity which involves interacting with the text and reflecting on readers' own experiences. When students read or listen to literature, they would search for information, answer questions, and experience emotions in the images and words of the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Students, more significantly, are able to develop social sensitivity, cultural awareness, and appreciations of emotions while or after reading literature works (Rosenblatt, 1995). Langer (1995) also claims that "it (literature) helps us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be." Literature expands human imagination and offers opportunities to reflect on one's own life. It is probable that students, through a literature-based instruction, will not only develop linguistic abilities but also become independent learners who share their ideas.

Literary works have the potential to expose learners to authentic culture of a target language. Authentic material "gives the learner the feeling that he or she is learning the 'real' language; that they are in touch with a living entity, the target language as it is used by the community which speaks it" Guariento and Morley (2001). Gilmore (2007) claim that language learners receive rich inputs from authentic material which brings them to a world full of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Therefore they perform better than those who only acquire knowledge from textbooks. Many other researchers also support the concepts of the use of authentic material in an EFL context (Karlsson, 2018; Li and Zhou, 2018).

Picture books combine visually appealing illustrations, brevity, sophisticated ideas, and great writing which make them attractive to young and old alike. Because the subject matter in many of them is sophisticated, students need not be embarrassed about reading them (Henry and Simpson, 2001). In other words, a picture book is defined as the one "that conveys its messages through two media, the art of illustrating and the art of writing" (Huck *et al.*, 1987). A great number of researchers claim that picture books could be used as a more effective way to learn a foreign language because reading stories in authentic language can help learners build their knowledge of the language (Ghosn, 2002; Birketveit, 2015; Huang, 2015; Huang and Chen, 2016; Ma, 2018). Herrell and Jordan (2016) added that visual scaffolding plays an important part to bridge the gap between language learners and the texts. In an EFL context, furthermore, insufficient interaction with native speakers seems to be an issue; it is more difficult for non-native learners to have a real contact with people from English-speaking countries and

opportunities to talk or discuss with them. Therefore, authentic material could serve as an alternative way for EFL learners to engage themselves with the English-speaking world.

English picture books have been introduced into Taiwan's elementary schools since 2001. Taiwanese learners can therefore easily comprehend their contents and as a result their levels of learning, motivation and confidence are enhanced through reading these picture books as a part of curriculum (Lin, 2003; Tyan and Shen, 2003). EFL learners can easily get frustrated when reading English due to the constraint of their limited English proficiency; however, illustrations in English picture books have the potential to increase their vocabulary, enhance their reading comprehension and boost up their motivation (Lee, 2015; Sun, 2016). Especially, for learners with difficulty in reading, picture books claim to help them, to "understand different viewpoints, analyze moods, messages and emotions, and articulate personal responses" to texts (Martens *et al.*, 2012). When teachers select reading material a little higher than learners' levels of language proficiency, learners are less likely to feel overwhelmed and anxious because they enjoy reading these material while also building their knowledge and skills.

Anxiety is defined as "feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry" (Spielberger, 1983). This kind of feeling is often associated with negative outcomes. Particularly, anxiety has long been discussed and regarded as a significant factor influencing learning performances and achievement (Kamarulzaman *et al.*, 2013; SHEU, 2017). Sieber *et al.* (1977) define anxiety as "a set of process having to do with awareness of the possibility of failure (by whatever subjective standard), and with attempts to resist that awareness, or to cope." The awareness of the possibility of failure has the potential to make learners lose confidence in themselves and gradually, to give up learning. Being too afraid of making mistakes or of failing easily, they often give unsatisfying performance or results. While learning a foreign language, EFL learners may also have a certain amount of negative feelings which may lead to failing performances or achievements (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Too much anxiety has a negative influence on learners' performances; moreover, the learners with higher levels of anxiety tend to speak less and produce shorter sentences.

Apart from learner anxiety, learners' attitudes and perception also play a significant part in learning performances or achievements. Savignon (1997) claims that "if all the variables in L2 acquisition could be identified and many intricate patterns of interaction between learner and learning context are described, ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would depend on the attitude of the learner". To put it in another way, learners' beliefs or views should be taken into consideration before the implementation of teaching lessons or curricula. Learners' affective or psychological factors should be considered an important teaching method. In a similar vein, Nunan (1993) argues that "teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what they want to learn and how they want to learn". There is a necessity to bridge the gap between teachers' and learners' expectations. More importantly, teachers should be more aware of learners' linguistic levels and emotional state in order to select suitable materials and create less-tensed environment. In reading English picture books, learners will not be overwhelmed by difficult words or language structures but enjoy reading and learning.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions were drawn from empirical studies (Lin, 2003; Tyan and Shen, 2003; Jin *et al.*, 2015) and integrated from Sociocultural Theory and Input Hypothesis. In Sociocultural Theory, learners are taken as active agents in the learning process, different from the roles learners play in a traditional teacher-dominated classroom. Language learners all belong to a L2 community, interacting with each other. From the views of Krashen, (1985), a learner's affective domains include motivation, attitude, self-confidence, and anxiety. If an affective filter develops, learning input would be inhibited. On the other hand, if the filter is low, the input would possibly reach the acquisition device and acquisition would take place. While the learners were reading English picture books, their affective filter was low and they started to engage in active reading and meaningful learning.

The previous research has focused on the relationship among language learners' anxiety, perceptions, and performances, presenting the results that high anxiety and negative perceptions lead to unsatisfying performances.

In this current study, it is hypothesized that integration of English picture books in language learning does affect learners' anxiety or perception. Two questions are formulated to explore the possibility and advantages of applying picture books for English learning purposes.

Question 1: Are there any significant differences in the level of the participants' anxiety after the study?

Question 2: What are the learners' perceptions of English picture book reading and attitudes towards English learning after the study?

#### 4. METHOD

The population of the study constituted 23 classes of freshmen in College A in northern Taiwan. All the students were pursuing diverse subjects including English as major of their graduation subject. Out of 23 classes, one was randomly selected through a convenient sampling method. During the 18-week (an academic semester) study, the participants ( $n = 25$ ) were college sophomores in northern Taiwan who were asked to participate in English picture book reading and writing activities during class hours. Each week, participants were required to read at least two English picture books, write down their thoughts, and then share them with their peers. The selected English picture books were written and illustrated by authors from all over the world; the level of English difficulty was a little higher than the participants' current English proficiency.

The course selected by the participants entitled "Appreciation and Creation of English Picture Books" for one semester. Before the study, they were informed of the purpose of the study. The participants who majored in non-English courses like Electrical Engineering, Hospital Management, and Information Technology Management they reported to have no confidence in their English and also showed very little motivation to learn English. Three instruments were used in the study to collect data: a background questionnaire, a questionnaire about perception and attitude towards English picture books, and an anxiety questionnaire. The background questionnaire was adapted from a questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) translated into Chinese by the researcher. The anxiety questionnaire was developed by the researcher and tested by 2 teachers and 35 students for its validity and reliability as well. The last instrument, a questionnaire about perception and attitude towards English picture books, consisted of 5 -Likert scale questions and 5 open-ended questions with the purpose of making participants reveal their inner feelings. The open-ended questions included:

1. What do you think about reading English picture books?
2. How do you feel while reading English picture books?
3. During the semester, what did you learn from English picture books?
4. How will you describe English picture books?
5. After the semester, what is your attitude towards learning English?

The present study integrates the features of action research, which were adopted to investigate the effect of reading English picture books on the participants' anxiety for English and their perception of English learning and reading. The learners' linguistic performance, first of all, was measured and studied through the intermediate-level GEPT reading test. Secondly, the anxiety questionnaire, in order to measure the learners' affective domain, was administered both before and after the intervention of the instruction strategy in order to discover whether there were any significant differences after the research implementation. Finally, perception and attitude towards English reading and learning were also analyzed from the responses.

For the sake of data validation, the teacher-researcher also kept a teaching journal to note down her observations of the experimental group, such as participation, interaction, asking for clarification, and so on. With the record of the teaching journal, the findings of the study data were more reliable and convincing.

## 5. RESULTS

The participants of the study consisted of 25 EFL college students (male: 20 and female: 5) from one college in Northern Taiwan. Their average duration of English learning was 10.92 years. The average age of participants was 20.44 years old. In addition to their demographics, the participants thought their overall proficiency level in English as compared with that of other students in their class was close to 'fair' ( $M = 1.94$ ) on the scale (excellent = 4; good = 3; fair = 2; poor = 1). When comparing their overall proficiency in English with that of native English speakers, they thought their English proficiency was close to 'poor' ( $M = 1.35$ ) on the scale (excellent = 4; good = 3; fair = 2; poor = 1). However, when asked about their perception of the importance of being proficient in English, they thought their English was close to 'very important' ( $M = 2.55$ ) on the scale (very important=3; important=2; not so important=1). Generally speaking, they do not have lots of confidence in their English proficiency but they believe in the importance of learning English.

In the following section, the findings of RQ2 related to reading habits, anxiety, and perception of English picture book reading reported by all the learners are analyzed and presented. Table 1 shows the participants' reading habits. They have been encouraged to read English for pleasure but 80% of them did not try to do so. Most of them were not habitual readers either in English or in their native language.

Table-1. Results of the participants' reading habits.

Questions	Frequency
1. During your previous studies, did you have access to books in English to read for pleasure?	Yes: 28% No: 72%
2. In the past, were you ever encouraged to read for pleasure in English by teachers?	Yes: 76% No: 24%
3. How often do you read something in English for pleasure?	every day: 4% every week: 4% every month: 12% never: 80%
4. In your leisure time, how often do you read books in Chinese for pleasure?	every day: 4% every week: 12% every month: 32% never: 52%

Source: The researcher-developed table.

Table-2. Reasons for being uninterested in English reading.

Reasons	Frequency
English language phobia	6%
Uninterested in reading English	25%
Difficult to understand	32%
No spare time for reading	12%
No reading habits	8%
No comments	17%

Source: The researcher-developed table.

When the participants were asked about the reasons why they did not read books in English for pleasure, 32% of them thought that English reading was too difficult; 25% of them were not interested in reading books in English for pleasure see Table 2.

Table 3 presents results from the survey of the participants' English anxiety and perceptions of English picture books. Before the study, they claimed not to have confidence in their English reading ability ( $M = 3.00$ ) but after the study, they started to feel more confident of it ( $M = 3.56$ ). Furthermore, they also did not show so much anxiety about English learning and reading ( $M = 3.54$ ). English picture books for the participants were also interesting ( $M = 3.32$ ). Most significantly, they would begin to read English picture books on their own for pleasure ( $M = 3.40$ ).

**Table-3.** English anxiety and perceptions of English picture books.

Questions	n	M	SD
1. Before this semester, I was confident in my English reading ability.	25	3.00	1.07
2. After this semester, I felt more confident in my English reading ability.	25	3.56	.71
3. After this semester, I felt less anxious about English learning.	25	3.54	.85
4. After this semester, I found it interesting to read English picture books.	25	3.32	.95
5. I would start to read English picture books for pleasure on my own.	25	3.40	1.00

Source: The researcher-developed table.

From the analysis discussed above, the participants revealed less anxiety in English learning and reading after the study; they would like to read English for pleasure on their own. To be more specific about the learners' perception, the following statements are direct quotes translated into English from the perception questionnaire.

S1: Before I never had a chance to read English picture books. After reading them, I found it quite interesting.

S2: After this semester, I began to appreciate the beauty of English. I would definitely start to spend more time learning and reading English.

S3: I no longer run away from English reading. I find English reading as fun after this class.

S4: Reading English picture books is more interesting than purely learning from English grammar books for taking exams.

S5: I started to understand that the learning process was more important than the results. I quite enjoyed the process of reading English picture books.

The students' statements above show that their attitude or perception towards learning English or English reading was changed and transformed. From being unconfident to confident, they showed more positive feelings about English learning and their own reading abilities. More importantly, they would like to continue reading English picture books on their own. In short, after the study, the participants had a more open mind towards English learning and reading. English learning was not just for exams but mostly for pleasure.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Given the above results, the study found that the levels of learners' anxiety were lowered after English picture book reading. Moreover, through the analysis of their perception of English picture books, learners became more interested in English learning and reading. They claimed that English learning was not so boring as they had thought before. Last but not the least, they spent more time reading English picture books on their own. These findings are in accordance with previous studies (Lin, 2003; Tyan and Shen, 2003; Huang, 2015; Lee, 2015; Huang and Chen, 2016; Sun, 2016; SHEU, 2017; Ma, 2018) which highlighted the significance of comprehensive input, illustrated books, and low-anxiety environment for language learners.

Certainly, it is not easy to learn a language in an EFL context given the insufficiency of language input and output. If the official language in an EFL environment is not English, especially in Taiwan, where most learners feel more comfortable communicating in Mandarin. They are unlikely to appreciate or seize chances to learn or use the target language. English for the Taiwanese is merely a school subject, not a useful tool to connect with the world outside. Apart from other school subjects, learning a language is a continuous process through trial-and-practice methods. However, fortunately, through English picture books, language learning does not have to be restricted to the classroom context or limited to the range of pre-designed course books, but can occur in a larger space in which learners have more opportunities for getting authentic language inputs.

The abovementioned findings in the present study provide evidence that a learning context which includes English picture books can make a positive effect on English language learners' anxiety and perception of English learning. From the perspectives of Sociocultural theory and comprehensible input theory (Krashen, 1985; Bandura, 1986) environmental and materials factors have an influence on learners' behavior, mind, and performance.



Language education in Taiwan is traditionally focused on rote-learning and test-oriented instructions. Language learners tend to be passive in their learning, relying more on teachers or designated textbooks. Fortunately, English picture books can now be applied to formal language education in order to provide EFL learners more opportunities for comprehensible language input and decrease their levels of English anxiety and change their attitude towards English learning. With these evidences revealed, the language learning environment in Taiwan could possibly be shifted to a more learner-centered and learner-directed context through reading English picture books.

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