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Instructional Methods Used in Digital Storybook Learning in EFL Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review

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A B S T R A C T

While digital storybooks are increasingly popular in language classrooms, there is still a lack of consensus on which specific instructional methods yield the most effective learning outcomes. This systematic literature review aims to identify instructional methods used in digital storybook-based learning and examine the learning outcomes associated with each approach. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this review systematically searched five specific academic databases (Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, and Taylor & Francis) covering studies published between 2021 and 2026. Twelve studies met the inclusion criteria for qualitative analysis. The findings reveal three main instructional approaches: task- and project-based learning, multimodal and technology-enhanced learning, and interaction- and support-based learning. These approaches are consistently associated with positive cognitive and affective outcomes. Overall, this review demonstrates that digital storybooks are most effective when integrated with appropriate, student-centered, and interactive pedagogical strategies rather than used as stand-alone reading tools.

Keywords: *Digital Storybooks, Instructional Methods, EFL Learning, Literacy Development, Multimodal Learning, Student Engagement*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, literacy is not only about reading printed texts. Literacy has expanded to include digital and multimodal abilities, meaning that learners need skills to understand and communicate using text, images, audio, and interactive media. This view is supported by grand theories of digital literacy and new literacies, which explain that literacy develops as technology becomes part of everyday learning (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). In line with these foundations, current research also shows that literacy learning in schools is increasingly linked to technology-based instruction and digital learning resources (Chuang, 2023; Dewi et al., 2024). Therefore, modern literacy should be seen as a broader competence that prepares learners to engage in a digital learning environment actively

Digital learning media have become commonly used as a tool to increase students' English skills and reading habits (Kusuma et al., 2024; Wiranatha & Santosa, 2024). One of the tools is the digital storybook. Digital storybooks have emerged as a prominent pedagogical tool in modern EFL classrooms, offering interactive and multimodal features that traditional books lack (Himawati et al., 2025). However, while their integration is increasingly advocated to enhance literacy, there remains a lack of consensus on which specific instructional methods yield the best outcomes in diverse educational settings. Considering the uneven access to technology, a systematic review is essential to identify effective methods that can be adapted to various classroom constraints.

From a multimodal literacy perspective, storybooks not only deliver meaning through written text but also through pictures and other modes, and this becomes stronger in digital

formats where interactive multimedia features are included (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Walsh, 2010). Recent evidence supports this idea. A systematic review reported that digital picture-book interventions and interactive reading applications generally have positive effects on children's emergent literacy, vocabulary, and comprehension, especially when multimedia support is designed appropriately (Chuang, 2023). Digital storybooks have also been developed and applied for children's literacy learning in Indonesia, showing their local relevance and classroom potential (Asih et al., 2024; Pitaloka et al., 2024). However, digital storybooks are most beneficial when multimedia elements support learning goals. For instance, animations that are directly related to storyline content can help comprehension, while decorative animations may distract learners (Son & Butcher, 2024). Therefore, digital storybooks have strong potential to support literacy learning, but their design and classroom use should be pedagogically meaningful.

However, grand theories of multimedia and multimodl learning also suggest that multimedia features are not always helpful if they distract children from the story. For example, interactive animations can support comprehension when they are directly connected to the storyline, but they can also reduce learning focus if they are only decorative (Son & Butcher, 2024; Walsh, 2010). This finding is important because it confirms that digital storybook effectiveness depends on design quality and classroom use. The development of digital storybooks is often connected with learning goals such as improving literacy, reading engagement, and language learning (Asih et al., 2024; Pitaloka et al., 2024). Therefore, digital storybooks should not be treated only as entertainment media but as learning materials that need clear instructional direction.

Most importantly, the effectiveness of digital storybooks is not determined by technology alone but also by the instructional methods used by teachers during reading activities (Santosa et al., 2022). Guided reading and dialogic reading perspectives explain that literacy learning becomes stronger when children interact with texts through questioning, scaffolding, and supportive feedback (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Simsek & Erdogan, 2015). Current research supports this idea. Studies show that guided reading with digital texts improves vocabulary learning more effectively than unguided digital reading, highlighting the importance of adult mediation (Allen, 2016) (Ratminingsih et al., 2020). Similarly, more recent studies show that instructional scaffolding combined with interactive storytelling increases children's narrative understanding and learning outcomes (Pranata et al., 2025). Teacher and parent involvement has also been reported as a key factor that supports children's reading readiness and literacy outcomes (Yanthi et al., 2017). In addition, instructional-method-based digital storybooks have been developed, such as TBLT-based digital storybooks that integrate tasks and learning objectives into digital reading activities (Fridayanti et al., 2023; Mahadewi et al., 2024). However, a significant gap exists in the existing literature as previous reviews have extensively explored the technical design of digital storybooks, such as the impact of animations and interactive hotspots, rather than systematically mapping the instructional frameworks used by teachers. Despite these findings, many studies still focus more on multimedia design rather than systematically mapping the instructional methods used in digital storybook learning. Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to identify kinds of instructional methods used in digital storybook learning and to summarize the outcomes, strengths, and limitations of each method.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation, this study is informed by the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework by Mishra and Koehler (2006), which emphasizes the integration of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge in effective teaching. In the context of digital storybooks, this framework highlights that technology alone is insufficient without appropriate pedagogical strategies. Additionally, the SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) model by Puentedura (2013) is utilized to evaluate whether the identified methods merely substitute traditional reading or redefine the learning experience through digital affordances. Thus, examining instructional methods becomes essential to understand how digital storybooks can be effectively implemented in EFL classrooms. The aims of this research are: 1) to identify the instructional

methods used in digital storybook learning, and 2) to examine the learning outcomes associated with each instructional method. Based on these objectives, the research questions in this systematic review are: 1) What instructional methods are used in digital storybook-based learning? and 2) What learning outcomes are reported from each instructional method used in digital storybook learning?

METHOD

This research methodology followed a systematic review approach, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and rigorous screening process. To ensure a comprehensive search, the initial stage involved identifying relevant literature across several high-quality databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, and Taylor & Francis. Specific Boolean operators were used to link key keywords, using the following search string: ("digital storybook" OR "e-storybook") AND ("EFL" OR "ESL") AND ("instructional method" OR "vocabulary acquisition"). This strategy allowed for the inclusion of a wide range of terminology while maintaining a focus on pedagogical impact in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

The initial search yielded approximately 310 articles. After removing duplicate records, 260 articles remained for title and abstract screening. Based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 60 articles were deemed potentially relevant and were further assessed through full-text reading. At this stage, 48 articles were excluded because they did not meet the specific quality or contextual requirements of this review. Detailed reasons for the rejection of these studies are summarized in Table below.

Table 1 Criteria and Reasons for Study Exclusion

Exclusion Criterion	Reason of Rejection	Number of Studies
Language Restriction	Articles were not written in English, limiting the comparability of linguistic analysis.	10
Non-peer-reviewed	Sources were identified as grey literature that lacked rigorous academic validation.	12
Contextual Irrelevance	Studies focused on L1 (Native Speaker) literacy development or general ESL settings that did not specifically address EFL pedagogical nuances.	15
Focus Incompatibility	Studies focused on the technical usability of the software or general gamification without evaluating vocabulary acquisition or literacy outcomes.	8
Methodological Insufficiency	Studies lacked empirical data	3
Total		**48**

As illustrated in Table 1, a detailed breakdown of the 48 articles excluded during the full-text assessment phase. The most common reason for exclusion was a mismatch in research context (n=15), where studies focused on native speakers rather than EFL learners. Additionally, 12 articles were removed for being non-peer-reviewed sources, ensuring that the final selection of 12 studies meets the academic standards required for this synthesis. To provide a clear overview of the literature search results and the subsequent filtration steps, the complete selection workflow is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram below Figure 1.

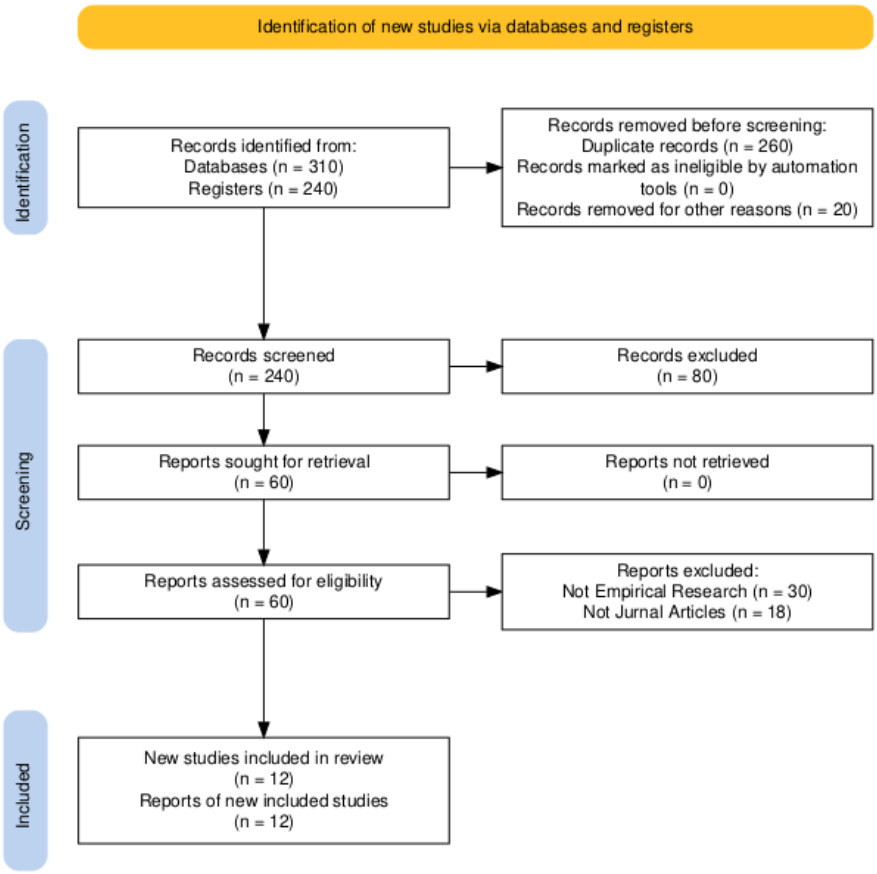

Figure 1. Figure 1

As illustrated in Figure 1, the initial identification phase yielded a total of 550 records. After removing 280 records due to duplication and other preliminary reasons, 240 records underwent title and abstract screening, which further narrowed the selection to 60 reports for full-text eligibility assessment.

To maintain the quality and focus of this review, these 60 reports were evaluated based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Specifically, studies were required to be peer-reviewed empirical research published in English and focused on EFL contexts. Consequently, 48 reports were excluded during this final stage. The specific reasons for these exclusions, such as the nature of the research (non-empirical) and publication type, are detailed in Table.

Table 2 Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**
Articles written in English or Indonesian	Articles written in other languages
Articles published between 2019 and 2025	Articles published before 2019
Empirical studies investigating the use of digital storybooks in educational settings	Studies not related to digital storybooks
Studies that clearly report instructional methods or pedagogical strategies used in digital storybook learning	Studies that do not describe instructional methods
Studies reporting learning outcomes related to literacy, such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, motivation, and engagement.	Studies that do not report learning outcomes
Empirical research articles (experimental, quasi-experimental, qualitative, or mixed-method studies)	Review articles, opinion papers, editorials, and book reviews.

Respondents

In this study, the term "respondents" refers to the selected empirical articles rather than individual participants, as this research adopts a systematic literature review design. A total of twelve articles were included based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria,

focusing on studies that examined instructional methods and learning outcomes in digital storybook-based learning.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a data extraction form developed by the researcher to systematically collect and organize relevant information from each selected article. The extracted data included research objectives, instructional methods applied, participant characteristics, and reported learning outcomes to ensure consistency and comparability across studies.

Procedures

The study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and systematic selection process. The procedure involved several stages, including identification of articles from multiple databases, removal of duplicates, screening of titles and abstracts, full-text eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies that met all criteria.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis. Instead of merely listing findings, the analysis compared and contrasted results across studies to identify patterns in digital storybook effectiveness. Findings were then synthesized based on Dual Coding Theory and Cognitive Load Theory to explain how multimodal input enhances EFL vocabulary acquisition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of twelve selected studies reveals how digital storybooks are integrated into diverse educational environments to support literacy development. Researchers across countries have implemented a variety of teaching approaches, from guided reading and multimodal storytelling to gamified e-books, to improve skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, and engagement.

These studies focused on two main dimensions: first, how teaching methods shape how students interact with digital content, and second, how these methods influence learning outcomes such as motivation and reading performance. A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is that digital storybooks do not function in isolation; their effectiveness is significantly enhanced by teacher mediation and well-designed pedagogical strategies. When combined with supportive guidance, these tools help students develop stronger literacy skills and deeper engagement. The specific characteristics, methods, and results of each study are summarized in Table below.

Table 3 The Overview of Related Studies

No	Author	Location	Instructional Method(s)	Learning Outcomes
1	(Khrismaswari et al., 2023)	Indonesia (Buleleng, Bali)	Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), based digital storybook (Design and Development approach)	Increased students' English learning motivation, improved literacy engagement, and enhanced English skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing)
2	(Shao, Nazleen, et al., 2025)	China	Gamified Interactive E-book integrating metacognitive reading strategies	Improved mathematical reading comprehension, word problem-solving performance, and increased students' reading motivation
3	(Arellano et al., 2025)	Philippines	Interactive e-storybook (READIFY) integrated with multimedia features	Significant improvement in Grade 5 students' English reading comprehension skills, shifting from instructional to independent reading level
4	(Amelia et al., 2024)	Indonesia	Multimodal digital storytelling–based e-	Improved seventh-grade students' English skills, creativity,

			book developed through R&D (ADDIE)	multimodal literacy, and learning motivation
5	(Rasyid et al., 2025)	Indonesia	Project-Based Learning integrated with Digital Storytelling (PjBL–DST)	Enhanced creative narrative writing skills and multimodal communication competence
6	(Indrayani et al., 2025)	Indonesia	Scaffolded digital storytelling using E-story	Improved reading aloud skills, including pronunciation, fluency, and students' confidence
7	(Nicholas & Paatsch, 2024)	Australia	Shared reading of digital storybooks mediated by parents	Enhanced parent–child interaction and differentiated reading practices, indicating potential support for early language and literacy development when digital storybooks are used in guided reading contexts
8	(Saadah et al., 2025)	Indonesia	Narrative-based interactive digital media for early reading	Improved early literacy outcomes, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and reading motivation through multimodal and interactive narrative features
9	(Sholahuddin & Rini, 2025)	Indonesia	Digital multimodal learning using Google Sites for narrative text instruction	Significant improvement in students' reading comprehension of narrative texts, along with increased learning engagement through multimodal features (text, images, audio, and interactive navigation)
10	(Wang, 2025)	China	Multimodal Digital Storytelling (DST) project-based learning grounded in transmediation	Improved EFL students' literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, translation, and digital literacy), enhanced critical thinking and decision-making abilities, and fostered moral cultivation and social responsibility
11	(Zhao & Shamsudin, 2024)	China	Dialogic reading with PEER and CROWD strategies	This intervention succeeded in significantly increasing children's reading engagement, which included physical dimensions (visual attention), verbal (actively asking and answering questions), and affective (enthusiasm for learning English).
12	(Istanti et al., 2026)	Indonesia	A collaborative learning model that integrates digital storybooks with Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology.	This implementation has been proven to increase student engagement, strengthen social interactions in literacy, and improve critical thinking skills and independent learning motivation of elementary school students.

A synthesis of twelve selected studies shows that the integration of digital storybooks in EFL contexts significantly improves literacy outcomes, a phenomenon theoretically explained by Dual Coding Theory. By providing simultaneous verbal and non-verbal input, such as synchronized audio, highlighted text, and animations, digital storybooks enable learners to construct interconnected mental representations of new vocabulary. This multimodal processing ensures that if learners encounter linguistic barriers in the text, auditory or visual cues provide secondary cognitive pathways for comprehension (Amelia et al., 2024; Istanti et al., 2026). Consequently, the effectiveness of these tools lies in their ability to reduce the cognitive effort required for decoding, freeing mental resources for deeper semantic processing and long-term vocabulary retention.

However, a critical comparison of instructional implementations reveals significant debate regarding the balance between learner autonomy and teacher mediation. While Rasyid

et al. (2025); Wang (2025)advocate a student-centred, project-based approach that maximizes creativity and independent narrative construction. Nicholas and Paatsch (2024); Zhao and Shamsudin (2024) offer contrasting perspectives, arguing that digital tools alone are insufficient for younger or less advanced learners. They argue that without structured support, such as dialogic reading or adult-mediated questioning, students often interact with digital storybooks at a superficial level, focusing more on the interactive "play" elements than on the linguistic content. This suggests that the pedagogical framework surrounding the tool is as important as the technology itself in determining literacy gains.

This discrepancy in results is further explained by Cognitive Load Theory, which warns against the potential distractions inherent in multimodal environments. As Son and Butcher (2024) highlight, poorly designed interactive features can act as "seductive details" that overload learners' working memory, leading to cognitive overload rather than enhanced learning. Hence, the high levels of motivation and reduced reading anxiety reported Shao et al. (2025) must be carefully managed through the "structured guidance" emphasized by Indrayani et al. (2025). Therefore, effective digital storybook instruction must strike the right balance: leveraging the excitement of multimodality to foster engagement while using teacher-led scaffolding to ensure that cognitive load remains focused on the intended pedagogical objectives.

Overall, while the reviewed literature generally supports the immediate benefits of digital storybooks, significant gaps remain regarding the sustainability of these learning outcomes and the demographic diversity of participants. Most current studies rely on short-term interventions that may be influenced by the "novelty effect," where student engagement temporarily increases due to the introduction of a new technological tool. To address this, future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to track long-term vocabulary retention and comparative studies between younger and older learners to determine how cognitive maturity influences multimodal processing. Based on the synthesis of these twelve studies. Digital storybooks should not be used as passive rewards or isolated pastimes; they should always be paired with task-based outcomes, such as retellings, digital storytelling, or collaborative projects, to transform visual engagement into active linguistic production. By shifting the focus toward long-term impacts and active pedagogy, the field can ensure that digital instruction leads to sustained literacy gains.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review examined instructional methods used in digital storybook-based learning and the associated learning outcomes across twelve empirical studies, revealing that the effectiveness of digital storybooks depends not on the technology itself but on how it is pedagogically implemented. The findings identify three major instructional approaches—task- and project-based learning, multimodal and technology-enhanced learning, and interaction- and support-based learning—each contributing differently to literacy development and proving most effective when aligned with specific learning objectives. These approaches consistently produce positive cognitive and affective outcomes: task- and project-based methods enhance productive language skills and collaboration, multimodal approaches support reading comprehension and digital literacy, and interaction-based methods strengthen early literacy, vocabulary development, and learner engagement through scaffolding and active participation. Overall, digital storybooks should be viewed as pedagogical tools rather than mere digital reading materials, as their potential is maximized through well-designed instructional strategies, appropriate teacher guidance, and interactive learning environments. While the study offers practical implications for educators and contributes to a clearer understanding of how instructional approaches shape learning outcomes, it is limited by variations in research contexts, sample characteristics, and instructional designs, suggesting the need for future research to explore long-term effectiveness and adaptation across diverse educational settings, including the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

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