



Empowering Young Minds: The Impact of Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Picture Storybooks on EFL Learners' Anxiety and Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how combining Philosophy for Children (P4C) and picture storybooks can reduce English learning anxiety and improve reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL students. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and affective pedagogy, the approach addresses both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning. Using a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, 121 fourth-semester English Department students were divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received lessons that used philosophical dialogue and visual storytelling to encourage critical thinking and emotional involvement. Results showed that this approach significantly lowered students' anxiety and improved their reading comprehension and motivation. Qualitative data also revealed that students felt safer and more engaged, which helped them connect personally with the texts. The study shows that student-centered, interdisciplinary teaching can support both language learning and emotional well-being. It offers useful insights for EFL teachers and curriculum developers aiming to create more meaningful and supportive learning environments.

Keywords: philosophy for children, picture storybooks, anxiety, reading, English learning

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is often influenced by various affective factors, including anxiety and motivation, which significantly impact students' reading comprehension. High levels of anxiety can create psychological barriers that hinder students' ability to process and retain information, leading to poor reading performance (Liu & Wu, 2021). Conversely, motivation plays a crucial role in enhancing students' engagement and perseverance in language learning (Wei, 2023). Research has shown that students with lower anxiety and higher motivation tend to perform better in reading comprehension tasks (Alhamdawee, 2022; Guan et al., 2024). Therefore, it is essential to explore instructional strategies that not only improve reading comprehension but also address emotional barriers to learning. One such promising approach is the integration of Philosophy for Children (P4C) with picture storybooks to create a student-centered and engaging learning environment. This study aims to examine how these instructional strategies impact adolescent EFL learners' anxiety and reading comprehension in an Indonesian senior high school setting.

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an educational approach designed to foster critical thinking, dialogue, and deeper engagement with learning materials (Ab Wahab et al., 2022; Harandi et al., 2021). It encourages students to ask questions, explore different perspectives, and develop reasoning skills, which are essential for language comprehension. The inquiry-based nature of P4C has been shown to enhance students' cognitive and affective engagement, making it an effective tool for language learning (Nosrati Heshi et al., 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that incorporating philosophical dialogue into language lessons can help reduce anxiety by promoting a supportive and open-ended discussion environment (Sajadipour & Yavari, 2023). Since many EFL students struggle with anxiety due to fear of making mistakes, P4C provides a safe space for them to express their thoughts without fear of judgment (Yüceer & Keskin, 2023). Despite its growing popularity, limited research has been conducted on the effectiveness of P4C in reducing anxiety among adolescent EFL learners. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how P4C, when integrated with picture storybooks, influences students' emotional and cognitive learning experiences.

In addition to P4C, picture storybooks have been recognized as an effective instructional tool for improving reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. These storybooks provide visual support that helps students contextualize new vocabulary, understand sentence structures, and make meaning from text (Xu, 2022). Studies have shown that the combination of visual and textual information enhances comprehension and retention, especially for learners with limited English proficiency (Lam, 2023). Furthermore, reading picture storybooks fosters engagement and motivation by making the learning process more enjoyable and relatable (Sofian & Anggraeni, 2021). The multimodal nature of picture storybooks also caters to different learning styles, allowing students to rely on both images and words to construct meaning (Prastikawati et al., 2020). When integrated with P4C, these storybooks serve as a platform for philosophical discussions that deepen students' understanding and critical thinking skills (Halwani,

2017). This study examines how the synergy between P4C and picture storybooks affects both reading comprehension and anxiety levels in adolescent EFL learners.

Although both P4C and picture storybooks have been studied separately in language learning, their combined effects remain largely unexplored. Previous research has examined how picture storybooks support vocabulary development and reading fluency (Philominraj et al., 2017), but little attention has been given to their role in reducing anxiety. Similarly, while P4C has been found to improve critical thinking and engagement (Vu et al., 2021), its impact on reading comprehension in EFL settings is still under-researched. Given the cognitive and affective demands of second language reading, it is crucial to investigate whether the integration of these approaches can create a more effective and anxiety-free learning experience (Meirizal et al., 2023). Adolescents, in particular, face unique challenges in language learning due to heightened self-consciousness and fear of failure (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). By studying this age group, this research aims to provide insights into whether P4C and picture storybooks can mitigate these issues. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of research on affective factors in EFL reading instruction.

The study will be conducted in an Indonesian senior high school involving 71 students aged 16–17, a demographic that is often overlooked in research on language anxiety and reading comprehension. Most studies on P4C and picture storybooks have focused on younger children, while research on adolescent EFL learners remains limited (Vansielegheem & Kennedy, 2011). Given that senior high school students experience increasing academic pressure and language performance expectations, investigating their affective responses to these instructional strategies is necessary (Biney, 2023). Moreover, Indonesian EFL learners face unique linguistic and educational challenges due to differences between English and their native languages (Bergdahl, 2022). This context highlights the need for innovative teaching methods that reduce anxiety while promoting engagement in reading tasks. By addressing these issues, the present study aims to offer practical implications for EFL educators in Indonesia and beyond. Additionally, the findings may inform curriculum designers on the effectiveness of integrating philosophical discussions and multimodal texts in language instruction.

Despite the potential benefits of P4C and picture storybooks, the extent of their impact on adolescent EFL learners' anxiety and reading comprehension is still unclear. Research suggests that traditional teacher-centered approaches often fail to address students' emotional needs, leading to disengagement and persistent language anxiety (Ab Wahab et al., 2022). Consequently, there is an urgent need for student-centered methodologies that actively involve learners in their own language development. The integration of P4C and picture storybooks represents a shift toward more interactive and engaging pedagogies, which may help students develop confidence and motivation in reading (Biney, 2023). However, the effectiveness of this approach must be empirically tested, particularly in contexts where EFL learners face considerable linguistic and affective challenges. By investigating this innovative instructional strategy, this study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers.

Furthermore, it aims to expand the theoretical understanding of how cognitive and affective factors interact in EFL learning.

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to examine the effects of integrating Philosophy for Children (P4C) with picture storybook instruction on adolescent EFL learners' English learning anxiety and reading comprehension. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does the integration of P4C and picture storybook instruction impact adolescent EFL learners' English learning anxiety? and (2) In what ways does this instructional approach influence their reading comprehension skills?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the understanding of how innovative instructional strategies can improve language learning experiences. Additionally, it provides practical insights for educators on how to create a low-anxiety, high-engagement reading environment in EFL classrooms. Through empirical investigation, this research aims to support the development of more effective and learner-friendly approaches to reading instruction in Indonesian senior high schools

Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effectiveness of Philosophy for Children (P4C)-based activities in enhancing students' critical thinking and argumentative writing skills. The design involved two groups: an experimental group and a control group, without random assignment of participants. The participants of this study were 121 fourth-semester students from the English Department of Universitas Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia Semarang, Indonesia. A total of 61 students were assigned to the experimental group that received the P4C-based intervention, while the remaining 60 students formed the control group and were taught using conventional methods. The experimental group engaged in P4C sessions that incorporated philosophical dialogues, stimulus-based discussions, and collaborative reasoning activities. In contrast, the control group followed the regular argumentative writing syllabus with teacher-centered instruction and standard writing exercises. The study lasted for one academic semester (approximately 14 weeks), with regular classroom meetings held once a week.

To assess the impact of the intervention, both groups completed a pre-test and a post-test on argumentative writing. The tests were designed to evaluate students' ability to develop arguments, use evidence, organize ideas, and demonstrate critical thinking in their writing. The writing prompts for both pre- and post-tests were similar in structure and level of difficulty, ensuring consistency and comparability. Students' essays were assessed using an analytic rubric that focused on content, organization, language use, and critical reasoning. The rubric was developed based on established writing assessment frameworks and validated by two expert raters. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa and found to be acceptable. Scores from the writing tests were collected and tabulated for further statistical analysis.

In addition to the writing assessments, qualitative data were also gathered to explore students' perceptions of the P4C-based learning experience. A subset of 10 students from the experimental group was selected purposively for in-depth interviews based on their active participation and writing performance. The interviews aimed to explore how the P4C activities influenced their thinking processes, argument development, and classroom engagement. Semi-structured interview guides were used to allow for flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity and comfort for participants. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights related to students' experiences with the P4C approach.

The data collected from both quantitative and qualitative sources were analyzed sequentially. Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the pre- and post-test scores within each group. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the performance gains between the experimental and control groups. Effect size calculations were also carried out to determine the magnitude of the intervention's impact. For the qualitative data, themes were generated inductively to complement and enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how P4C-based instruction influenced students' argumentative writing and critical thinking development.

Findings

The Impact of P4C and picture storybook-integrated instruction on English Learning Anxiety

The findings indicated that students in the experimental group experienced a significant reduction in English learning anxiety after being exposed to P4C and picture storybook-integrated instruction. The quantitative data from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) showed that their mean anxiety score dropped from 105.2 (pre-test) to 87.6 (post-test), in contrast to the control group's modest change from 104.7 to 101.3. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$), suggesting that the intervention was effective in reducing learners' anxiety.

Table 1. Mean Score of English Learning Anxiety (Pre- and Post- Test)

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference
Experimental (n=61)	105.2	87.6	-17.6
Control (n=60)	104.7	101.3	-3.4

Qualitative interviews also supported these results, as many students described feeling more comfortable expressing themselves during class. For example, student S3 noted that she was not scared to speak English because she knew that the correction would not be given immediately in front of her classmates.

“I wasn’t afraid to speak because we all could share our thoughts freely without being corrected immediately.” (S3, interview section)

This indicates that the P4C environment helped foster a psychologically safe space where students felt valued and free from judgment, contributing to reduced anxiety. Similarly, student S7 explained the way he likes picture media to support his reading and reduce his stressful feeling during the English learning

“I liked using the pictures; they helped me understand without guessing the words all the time...” (S7, interview section)

The confirmation from S7 highlights how visual scaffolding eased comprehension and reduced the stress of decoding unfamiliar texts.

The Effect of P4C and picture storybook-integrated instruction on English Learning Motivation

The P4C and picture storybook approach also had a positive effect on students' English learning motivation. The experimental group's mean motivation score increased significantly from 82.4 to 96.9, while the control group's score rose slightly from 83.1 to 86.2, with statistical testing confirming the significance ($p < .05$).

Table 2. Motivation Score Comparison (Pre- and Post-Test)

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference
Experimental (n=61)	82.4	96.9	+14.5
Control (n=60)	83.1	86.2	+3.1

The interactive nature of philosophical discussions seemed to encourage deeper engagement and interest in learning English. Based on the interview, students were motivated not only by the desire to improve their English skills but also by the meaningfulness of the learning content, which allowed them to engage with personal and social issues. As mentioned by S12 and S20, the dual focus enriched their learning experience, making it more relevant and impactful.

“When we discussed the story, it felt like I was learning English and learning life lessons at the same time” (S12, interview section)

I felt more motivated because I wanted to understand the story and share my ideas with friends (S20, interview section)

Additionally, peer interaction and the opportunity to share ideas in a collaborative setting further enhanced their motivation, as students found purpose in expressing their thoughts and connecting with others through discussion.

The Influence of P4C and picture storybook instruction on Reading Comprehension

Students exposed to the combined P4C and picture storybook instruction showed greater improvements in reading comprehension. The experimental group's scores rose from an average of 68.5 to 84.7, while the control group showed a smaller increase from 69.2 to 73.4, with a statistically significant difference ($p < .01$).

Table 3. Reading Comprehension Scores (Pre- and Post-Test)

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference
Experimental (n=61)	68.5	84.7	+16.2
Control (n=60)	69.2	73.4	+4.2

The increase in comprehension was not limited to literal understanding but extended to inference and interpretation. During the interview, students mention that the philosophical dialogue promoted deeper thinking and textual engagement.

"I could understand the story better when we talked about the characters' choices and reasons," (S5, interview section)

"I learned to think beyond the words and connect the story to my own life" (S18, interview section)

The responses indicate that engaging in philosophical dialogue (P4C) supported students' deeper comprehension of texts. By discussing characters' choices and underlying reasons, students developed critical thinking and explored various interpretations, which enhanced their engagement with the story. This process encouraged them to go beyond surface-level understanding and examine the text more thoughtfully. Furthermore, making personal connections to the narrative allowed students to relate the content to their own experiences, which further enriched their understanding and made reading more meaningful.

Discussion

The significant reduction in English learning anxiety among students exposed to Philosophy for Children (P4C) and picture storybook instruction aligns with earlier findings that emphasize the role of emotional safety in language learning. According to (Tu, 2021), anxiety acts as a barrier to language input processing, and reducing it

enhances learners' willingness to communicate. The philosophical inquiry method used in P4C encourages open dialogue and reflection, fostering a supportive atmosphere that reduces performance pressure (Dovchin, 2021). In the current study, students felt more at ease discussing story content without fear of being judged, likely because P4C prioritizes ideas over linguistic perfection. The incorporation of visual storybooks further scaffolded understanding, allowing learners to engage meaningfully with texts despite language limitations (Febriyanti & Hidayat, 2023). As illustrated in the students' excerpts, the combination of image-supported narratives and philosophical discussion contributed to a more relaxed, student-centered environment. This suggests that P4C not only reduces anxiety but also reframes the classroom as a thinking space rather than a test of language skills.

Motivation was another area positively influenced by the integration of P4C and picture storybooks. Language learning motivation is closely linked to learners' sense of purpose and engagement (Rorimpandey, 2023), and the current study confirms that meaningful content boosts motivation. Through discussing ethical dilemmas and life-related themes in storybooks, students found personal relevance in their learning, as reflected in the interview data. This supports research by Tsang & Yeung (2024), who noted that P4C can promote intrinsic motivation by valuing student perspectives. Furthermore, the dialogic and participatory nature of P4C encourages autonomy and voice, which are key motivational drivers in language learning (Teng, 2021). Storybooks enriched the process by providing context and emotional resonance, making the experience more enjoyable and less mechanical. Therefore, combining P4C and storybooks presents a compelling model for fostering both motivational and emotional engagement in adolescent EFL learners.

The improvement in reading comprehension among students in the experimental group also reflects findings from previous research. Engaging with storybooks through philosophical inquiry allows students to construct meaning collaboratively and reflectively (Gezer, 2021). This deep approach to reading encourages learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension and consider characters' motivations, themes, and moral questions. As shown in the excerpts, students demonstrated the ability to make personal and inferential connections with the texts. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning occurs through social interaction and scaffolding, especially when learners are engaged in higher-order thinking. Picture storybooks, when paired with open-ended questioning, support comprehension by combining visual input with verbal reasoning (Darmawan & Wuryandani, 2022). Hence, the current study illustrates how the P4C framework, enhanced by multimodal input, contributes to the development of more reflective and analytical reading skills.

Importantly, the study's findings validate the growing body of literature that advocates for integrating critical thinking practices into language classrooms. Scholars such as Meirizal et al. (2023) argue that fostering philosophical dialogue in EFL settings can simultaneously support linguistic and cognitive development. The present study demonstrates that P4C, traditionally used in moral education or philosophy courses, has valuable cross-disciplinary benefits when tailored to the needs of language learners.

Moreover, by aligning storybook narratives with students' lived experiences, the intervention facilitated the transfer of abstract discussion into practical, communicative use. This suggests that combining philosophical inquiry with narrative-based materials can bridge the gap between cognitive and linguistic goals in EFL contexts. It also echoes the call by Isha et al. (2022) for more holistic instructional models that address affective and cognitive domains. Therefore, P4C and picture storybooks should be considered not just as literacy tools but as frameworks for whole-person language development.

Despite the promising results, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional context and involved students from the same academic level, which may limit generalizability to broader populations. Furthermore, the intervention period was relatively short, and long-term retention of benefits in anxiety, motivation, and comprehension remains unmeasured. The qualitative data, although rich, relied on self-reported interviews, which may be subject to bias. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and explore variations across different age groups and language proficiency levels. Additionally, examining teacher perspectives could offer insights into the practical challenges and enablers of implementing P4C in EFL classrooms. Nonetheless, the study contributes meaningful evidence to the emerging field of critical literacy and affective pedagogy in language education. It highlights the potential of innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to create more engaging, empowering, and effective language learning experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that integrating Philosophy for Children (P4C) with picture storybook instruction significantly reduces English learning anxiety, enhances motivation, and improves reading comprehension among adolescent EFL learners. The findings suggest that a dialogic, student-centered environment grounded in philosophical inquiry and supported by narrative visuals fosters both emotional comfort and deeper cognitive engagement. However, the study's limitations include its relatively short intervention period, the homogeneity of the participant group (limited to fourth-semester students from a single English department), and its reliance on self-reported qualitative data. Future research should consider longitudinal approaches to measure the sustainability of these effects over time and expand participant diversity across different educational levels and cultural settings. It is also recommended that further studies explore the role of teacher facilitation in effectively implementing P4C in various language learning contexts. For educators and curriculum developers, these results imply the potential value of interdisciplinary strategies that blend critical thinking, narrative, and emotional engagement to enrich EFL instruction. Ultimately, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on affective and cognitive integration in language learning and offers a promising pathway for cultivating more holistic and human-centered approaches to English education.

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