

Once Upon a Word: Growing Young Minds with Picture Story Vocabulary Builders

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Abstract

The current community service project aimed to meet the needs of a private elementary school in Yogyakarta by providing picture storybooks for 5th-grade students to enhance their English vocabulary mastery through reading activities. Five storybooks were created using a modified 4D development model (Define, Design, and Develop), aligning with biblical lessons and the school's values. The design and development of the storybooks were based on a needs assessment conducted through interviews with English teachers and four students, as well as a questionnaire for the students. The storybooks were used as complementary materials in English classes to foster student vocabulary acquisition and introduce moral values and virtues in life. Each storybook includes a narrative, illustrations to stimulate creativity and imagination, a moral value section, and a vocabulary list. The community service project highlights the potential of storybooks to foster language acquisition and moral development. Future community service opportunities are also available.

Kata Kunci: English vocabulary; Moral values; Picture storybooks; Reading.

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Introduction

Vocabulary is the most essential part of language learning in helping to construct a sentence. Mastering many words is very important for young learners learning a foreign language, such as English. According to Cameron (2001), English should be taught starting from the elementary level because the ideal age for children to learn English is before they are 12. Children have good language development at that age, so when they learn English, they understand it more easily. In addition, according to Shobikah (2018), learning foreign languages at school should be started early, making it easier for children to have a higher interest and concern for learning English. One of the activities that can improve children's interest and motivation in learning English is using picture storybooks. Picture storybooks can make reading and learning English easier. Designing activities using picture storybooks motivates children to learn English, especially in learning and improving new vocabulary. Picture storybooks can engage children in learning, especially in reading English books and learning English vocabulary, because with the help of picture storybooks, children are more easily stimulated to learn the English language and assemble words (Ferdiyanti & Musfroh, 2018).

Students are interested in picture storybooks containing light, everyday life stories. Combining pictures and writing in storybooks can prevent students from quickly getting bored of reading and learning English. Short storybooks with pictures are very popular among elementary school students because picture storybooks look beautiful. Through picture storybooks, students can learn English well, learn new words, and enjoy the stories. Carlisle et al. (2013) state that picture storybooks provided an excellent opportunity to expose students to new vocabulary and helped build their understanding of the meaning of these words. Picture storybooks engage young students in reading activities, and it is essential to develop emergent literacy skills, including vocabulary development (Shuqair & Dashti, 2019). Nurul & Abbas, (2021) argue that picture short storybooks can help students improve their reading of English books, make it easier for students to learn English, and make learning activities fun; picture short storybooks are also an effective method as media or material for teaching English in the classroom.

Numerous studies have shown that picture storybooks effectively enhance vocabulary learning for elementary students. [Son et al. \(2023\)](#) claim that picture storybooks effectively promote vocabulary acquisition in young learners. The study reveals that students who read picture storybooks had better vocabulary outcomes than those who did not—using picture storybooks to increase vocabulary in elementary school students. Several strategies have been proposed for using picture storybooks in vocabulary. One of the most effective strategies is pre-teaching essential vocabulary before reading the storybook. This enables students to encounter the words multiple times and reinforces their learning. [Otoluwa et al. \(2022\)](#) found that picture storybooks significantly improved vocabulary knowledge starting from the elementary school level; using vivid and colorful illustrations can help engage students' attention and enhance their retention of new vocabulary words. [Mastika et al. \(2023\)](#) also found that reading picture storybooks can improve children's reading comprehension skills, aiding their vocabulary learning.

Moreover, several studies have used picture storybooks to learn vocabulary for young learners with diverse backgrounds and abilities [Hashemifardnia et al. \(2018\)](#). found that teaching children new vocabulary through picture books is practical and helpful because picture storybooks contain text, illustrations, history, culture, and art. Their study also revealed that picture storybooks can give children an exciting experience in learning new vocabulary. Similarly, [Kochiyama \(2016\)](#) states that picture short storybooks and children's literature can motivate students to learn English, develop vocabulary, and enrich their knowledge and culture.

This community service aimed to produce picture storybooks to improve elementary school students' vocabulary mastery through reading activities. A needs assessment conducted in a private elementary school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, revealed that the school desired to improve the student's reading skills and vocabulary mastery using picture storybooks. The school principal stated that the school needed picture storybooks with biblical stories and themes that align with the school's values. Since such picture storybooks are unavailable in the market, the school needed to create them. However, they lacked the resources and time to do so. These storybooks are intended to supplement the materials taught in the English class. Moreover, the storybooks are expected to help improve student vocabulary mastery, make English reading activities more fun, and engage students in reading activities.

Additionally, based on the data gathered from the school principal, the picture storybooks are intended to inspire and encourage children to dream bigger. Using attractive illustrations and exciting narratives, the picture storybooks are expected to tell various characters and stories that illustrate daily lives, children's dreams, and imaginations. Through the picture storybooks, children are expected to dare to dream and overcome various obstacles to achieve their dreams. The storybooks also promote the school values of resilience, determination, and never giving up.

Methods

This community service, conducted at a private elementary school in Yogyakarta, aimed to design picture storybooks with biblical stories and themes that align with the school's values. Employing a modified 4D model (Define, Design, and Development), the project gathered the data for needs assessment through interviews with an English teacher and four students from the 5A and 5B classes. Additionally, a survey was distributed to 29 students after English lessons, and classroom observations were conducted in both classes. Since the storybooks were intended for fifth graders, data collection was focused on this specific grade level. Figure 1 shows students filling out the questionnaire on the themes they like and the preferences of characters in the storybooks.



Figure 1. 5th Grade Students Filling out the Questionnaire

The English teacher mentioned that she frequently uses picture storybooks the school provides for classroom instruction. While she primarily relies on digital resources from established publishers like Pearson and Cambridge, she cannot find reading materials that align with the biblical themes and the school's values as required by the school curriculum. She added that the school needs picture storybooks useful as educational materials and in students' daily lives. The contents of these books can inspire children and include values from the Bible and Christian elements. Interviews with four students revealed a need for picture storybooks with a balance of pictures and text, including dialogue within the stories. Interestingly, nearly all students preferred printed picture storybooks over digital versions, with reduced eye strain as the reason for this preference. They also found printed books more practical in comprehending stories and learning English vocabulary.

The survey on the preferred theme of storybooks revealed that out of 29 students, six students (21%) chose picture book stories about families, 20 students (69%) preferred stories about dreams, and three students (10%) chose slice-of-life stories. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage distribution of these preferences.

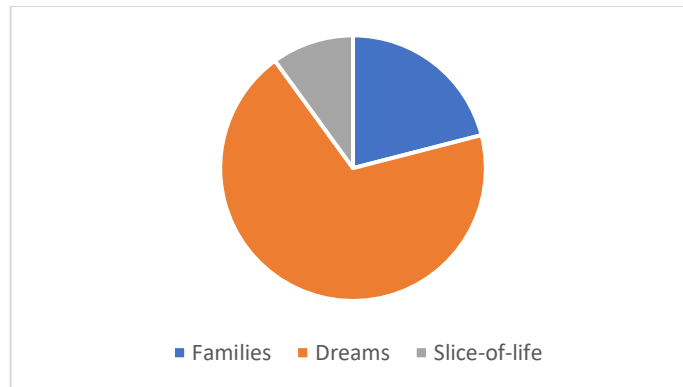


Figure 2. The Percentage Distribution of the Themes

Regarding the choice of story characters, 19 students (66%) preferred human characters, while 10 (34%) preferred animal characters. Figure 3 illustrates the preferred characters in the storybooks.

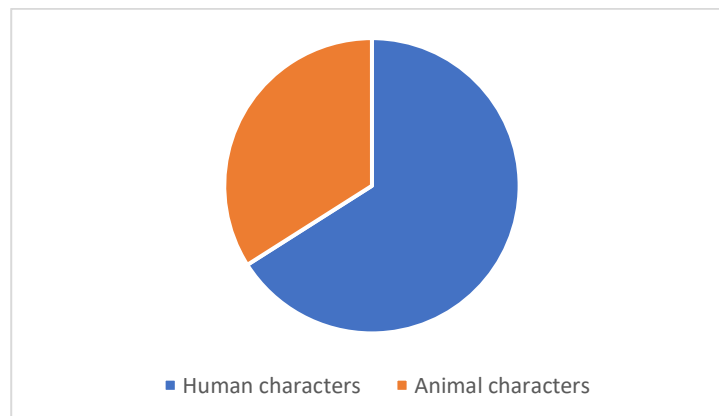


Figure 3. The Preferred Characters

Creating a storyboard was the initial step in the Design and Development stages. This storyboard was carefully designed to align with the needs assessment results. Specifically, the stories are based on biblical narratives and incorporate the values owned by the school. The characters in the stories are human, aligning with the student's preferences. Additionally, the genre of the story centers around the theme of dreams, reflecting the popular choice among students. The storyboard serves as a detailed blueprint, outlining the sequence of events, key themes, and visual elements to ensure the final product meets the educational and inspirational goals set by the school. Once the storyboard was finalized, the picture storybooks were produced, ensuring each book adhered to the storyboards and communicated the intended biblical lessons and values.

Result and Discussion

These picture short storybooks consist of 5 books, each featuring a different story centered around the theme of "dreams." The titles of the books are as follows: the first storybook is "Alice's Dream," the second is "Believe in Miracle," the third is "Stepping Together: Friendship and Dream," the fourth is "From Dream to Reality," and the last is "Failure is The Beginning of All Success." Similar to children's storybooks, each book generally includes conversational sentences within the stories. The language is simple and easy-to-understand English, making it accessible for readers to engage with and learn from the stories. The short storybooks are based on biblical lessons derived from Galatians 5:22-23, which outlines the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The storybooks also induce the school values of resilience, determination, and never giving up. These values are integrated into the narratives of the stories. Each storybook delves into these themes through engaging and inspiring short stories about children's dreams.

Structurally, each book consists of three parts: the main story, the moral values derived from the stories, and a collection of vocabulary lists to aid in language learning. The moral value section teaches young readers life lessons and values to foster character development and encourage positive behaviors. The vocabulary list section is curated to help young readers learn new words from the story, enhancing language acquisition. The list provides young readers with various words and phrases in the story to support comprehension of the new vocabulary application in the context. English teachers can use the vocabulary list to assess learners' understanding of the text. Teachers can use the list to design quizzes, tests, and other assessments to evaluate students' vocabulary acquisition progress. The following is a synopsis of five stories from each book.

Picture Storybook 1: Alice's Dream

The first story, "Alice's Dream," centers around a girl named Alice who resides on the outskirts of the village and deeply loves and cares for animals. When her teacher assigns homework to write about her future dreams, Alice is at a loss, unsure of what she wants to become. Feeling confused, Alice turns to prayer, seeking guidance from God regarding her aspirations. Through Alice's journey, the story explores the values of love, kindness, patience, and joy. These virtues are integrated into the narrative, illustrating how Alice navigates her uncertainties with faith and perseverance. Figure 4 displays example pages from the storybook.



Figure 4. Pages from "Alice's Dreams"

Picture Storybook 2: Believe in Miracle

The second story centers around a boy named John, known for his intelligence and talent in painting. John dreams of becoming a renowned painter from a young age, driven by his passion and determination. However, his aspirations are challenged when he experiences a car accident on his way to a painting competition, resulting in severe injuries and a fractured right hand. John undergoes a long period of treatment and recovery, during which he struggles with the inability to use his hands freely, thus hampering his participation in the competition. This story emphasizes the "believe" theme, highlighting John's resilience and firm belief in his artistic dreams despite his difficulties. It introduces students to the values of the spirit—patience, self-control, and faithfulness—showcasing how John navigates through obstacles with perseverance and faith. Figure 5 showcases pages from the storybook, featuring illustrations from John's journey. Attractive visuals and simple, accessible language for young readers complement these pages.



Figure 5. Pages from “Believe in Miracle”

Picture Storybook 3: Stepping Together: Friendship and Dream

The third story is about Caca, a cheerful, intelligent, and athletic girl with a close relationship with God. From a young age, Caca develops a passion for dancing and finds joy in expressing herself through this hobby. Her loving family and friends support Caca's dream of becoming a dancer. However, her aspirations face challenges from her friend Alda, who weakens Caca's ambitions. Despite this, Caca maintains her care for Alda and attempts to overcome the obstacles. This story explores the theme of "Stepping Together: Friendship and Dream," highlighting Caca's journey of pursuing her dreams while navigating complex friendships. It introduces the values of love, gentleness, and patience—illustrating how Caca expresses these virtues in her interactions with others and in her pursuit of her passion for dancing. Figure 6 displays example pages from the storybook.



Figure 6. Pages from “Stepping Together: Friendship and Dream”

Picture Storybook 4: From Dream to Reality

The fourth story is about Joe, a bright, diligent child with solid faith. Joe is passionate about reading novels and dreams of becoming a novelist. However, his parents have different wishes for him—they encourage Joe to become a teacher. Despite their wishes, Joe remains committed to his desire to pursue his passion for writing and attempts to persuade his parents to support his dreams. This story explores the theme of "From Dream to Reality," depicting Joe's journey of turning his aspirations into achievements. It introduces the values of peace, patience, loyalty, and self-control—showcasing how Joe navigates his family’s expectations while keeping his dreams and values. Figure 7 displays example pages from the storybook.



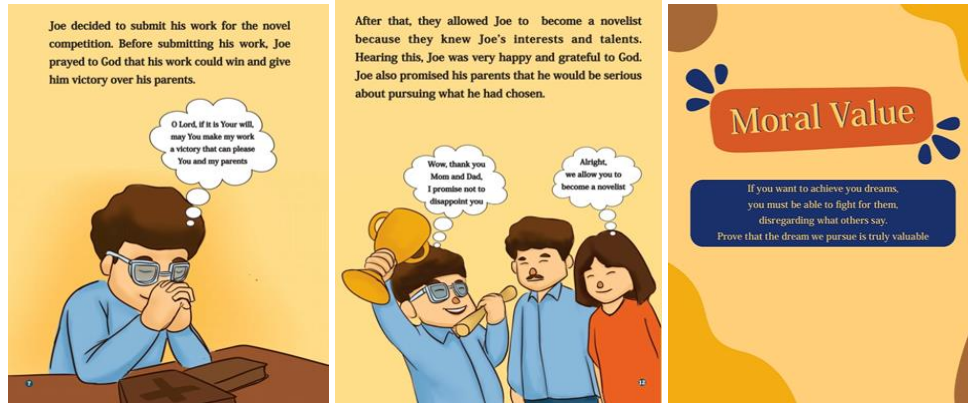


Figure 7. Pages from “From Dream to Reality”

Picture Storybook 5: Failure is The Beginning of All Success

The fifth story is about Ava, a diligent and creative girl known for her friendly nature and many friendships. Inspired by her older sister, a talented chef, Ava frequently assists her sister in the kitchen and is interested in cooking and culinary arts. Ava dreams of becoming a great chef, motivated by her passion for learning and culinary creativity. This story embodies the theme of "Failure Is the Beginning of All Success," highlighting Ava's journey of perseverance and growth. It explores how Ava encounters challenges and obstacles in becoming a chef, emphasizing the importance of resilience and learning from failures as stepping stones to success. Embedded in the story are the values of the spirit—patience, self-control, and faithfulness—illustrating how Ava embodies these virtues as she navigates obstacles and works towards her culinary dreams. Figure 8 displays example pages from the storybook.



Figure 8. Pages from “Failure is the Beginning of All Success”

Five storybooks with biblical lessons and school values were aimed at fifth-grade elementary school students. Its engaging stories and attractive illustrations are tailored to captivate young readers, sparking their interest and enthusiasm for learning English vocabulary. One of the critical features of this book is its ability to serve as a bridge between classroom learning and real-world language use. By presenting English vocabulary in a meaningful context through stories and illustrations, the book helps students grasp the practical application of the language. This approach not only enhances their vocabulary but also improves their comprehension. Additionally, each storybook includes a comprehensive vocabulary list at the back, enabling students to learn the new vocabulary used in the story. The lists serve as a valuable resource for lesson planning, allowing teachers to incorporate new vocabulary into their teaching easily.

Teachers can utilize each of the five stories in this book as educational material across five sessions. For example, the teacher selects one of the available story titles at the beginning of each class, guiding students through reading aloud activity. Following this, students are prompted to re-read the story to deepen their understanding of its content. Once a story is completed, the teacher facilitates a discussion by posing questions based on the story. For instance, the teacher might ask, "What inspired Ava to pursue a career as a chef?". Additionally, the stories serve as discussion topics to explore their underlying themes. Teachers can also employ the vocabulary lists at the back of the book to create quizzes and enrich students' vocabulary.

Picture storybooks have some significant advantages, making them a valuable resource for students and teachers. Firstly, the themes of struggle and dreams are designed to captivate young readers. By incorporating these themes into the stories, the books entertain and communicate essential life lessons and values, serving as a powerful tool for character development. Secondly, the book's attractive illustrations enrich the overall reading experience. These visuals complement the stories and help contextualize vocabulary, facilitating comprehension and retention of new words. Combining engaging stories and appealing illustrations creates a practical learning experience that improves students' imagination and creativity. Another key strength of the books is the presence of moral messages within each story. These moral messages reinforce positive values and teach valuable life lessons, encouraging students to reflect on their actions and behaviors through the stories.

Conclusion

The current community service project aimed to address the needs of a private elementary school in Yogyakarta by providing storybooks for the 5th-grade students to enhance their vocabulary mastery through reading activities. The storybooks needed by the school were designed to align with biblical lessons and the school's values. Five storybooks were created using a modified 4D development model (Define, Design, and Develop) based on the needs assessment results. These short storybooks, inspired by Galatians 5:22–23, serve as complementary materials in English classes to improve student's English vocabulary and introduce moral lessons through life values.

The storybooks begin with a narrative that presents the characters' worlds and their struggles and aspirations. The narrative portrays critical moral messages for young readers. Moreover, the illustrations in the storybooks help young readers get into the world of the characters and story and stimulate their imagination and creativity. The book's next section is the moral value section, highlighting life values that young readers can learn from the story. This section is expected to reinforce virtues demonstrated by the characters in the story, encouraging young readers to apply them in their own lives. Following the moral value section is the vocabulary list section designed to aid vocabulary acquisition. These lists provide a selection of words and phrases in the story that can be used for the students and teachers. For the students, the lists promote the retention of new vocabulary. For the teachers, the lists serve as a resource for assessing students' understanding of the story. Therefore, by incorporating these three sections, the storybooks motivate students to read and acquire new vocabulary and foster an understanding of moral values and ethical behaviors.

Through these engaging and thought-provoking stories, students are expected to enhance their reading skills and develop values such as empathy, compassion, and resilience. By incorporating these enriching narratives into the classroom, teachers may create an engaging and motivating environment where students improve their English proficiency while learning essential values and life skills.

The successful creation of storybooks in this community service highlights the potential of storybooks as an instructional media that promotes language acquisition and life values. This project can be adapted and extended to other schools, from kindergarten to high schools, to foster motivation in reading activities and promote language acquisition and moral values by providing interesting and engaging learning experiences through reading storybooks.

Future community service could focus on the implementation and effectiveness of the storybooks in fostering vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, workshops and training sessions for English teachers could

be developed to optimize the use of storybooks in the classroom. Future community service can also engage the local community and encourage parents to be involved in reading activities, helping reinforce reading habits and values imparted in the storybooks.

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