

# The Role of Illustrated Digital Storybooks in Supporting Second Language Acquisition: A Qualitative Analysis Using the Let's Read App

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## Abstract

Illustrated digital storybooks have increasingly been used as learning resources to support young learners' Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by combining visual and textual input in engaging ways. While previous studies have examined digital tools in language learning, limited qualitative research has explored how illustrated digital storybooks specifically support young learners' engagement, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition through real user experiences. This study aims to investigate the role of illustrated digital storybooks in supporting SLA among young learners through the use of the Let's Read application. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study involved observation and an in-depth semi-structured interview with a nine-year-old elementary school learner to explore responses toward illustrated digital storybooks in the app. The findings indicate that illustrated digital storybooks enhance learner motivation, sustain engagement, and facilitate vocabulary acquisition by providing contextual visual support and age-appropriate story organisation. The thematic categorisation and ad-free environment of the application further contributed to a positive and focused learning experience. This study concludes that illustrated digital storybooks, when designed with meaningful visuals and structured content, can effectively support young learners' SLA. The findings suggest that integrating such digital resources into language learning practices may foster more engaging and accessible learning experiences for young language learners.

**Keywords:** Let's Read App, Illustrated Digital Storybooks, Second Language Acquisition

## 1. Introduction

### *Background of the study*

Early childhood is widely recognised as a critical period for language acquisition, during which children demonstrate heightened cognitive flexibility and sensitivity to linguistic input. During this "golden period," young learners are particularly capable of acquiring a second language naturally through exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input (Ellis, 2020). Krashen's Input Hypothesis emphasises that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level but remains understandable through contextual support (Krashen, 1982). As this early phase of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) forms the foundation for later linguistic and cognitive development, providing appropriate learning resources during this stage is crucial (Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

In recent years, digital learning resources have gained increasing attention for their potential to support young learners' SLA. Among these resources, illustrated digital storybooks offer a multimodal learning experience by integrating text, visuals, and interactive elements. According to multimedia learning and dual coding principles, the combination of verbal and visual input enhances comprehension, memory retention, and learner engagement (Mayer, 2020; Paivio, 2018). Visual illustrations provide contextual cues that help young learners infer meaning, support vocabulary acquisition, and sustain motivation during the language learning process (Gu, 2021; Dewaele et al., 2020).

One digital platform designed for young learners is the *Let's Read* application, developed by The Asia Foundation. The application provides a wide range of illustrated, multilingual, and culturally diverse digital storybooks that are organised according to themes and difficulty levels. Its interactive design, vibrant illustrations, and age-appropriate content allow young learners to engage with stories in a low-anxiety environment and at their own pace, which supports autonomous learning and sustained engagement (Marsh et al., 2019). Such features position *Let's Read* as a potentially effective tool for supporting SLA in early childhood contexts.

### Research gap

Despite the growing body of research on digital tools for language learning, limited qualitative studies have specifically examined how illustrated digital storybooks support young learners' SLA through direct learner interaction and experience. In particular, there remains a lack of in-depth qualitative evidence exploring how children engage with illustrated digital storybooks and how visual elements contribute to motivation, engagement, and vocabulary acquisition within applications such as *Let's Read*. Addressing this gap is important to better understand the pedagogical value of illustrated digital storybooks in early SLA contexts.

### Research questions

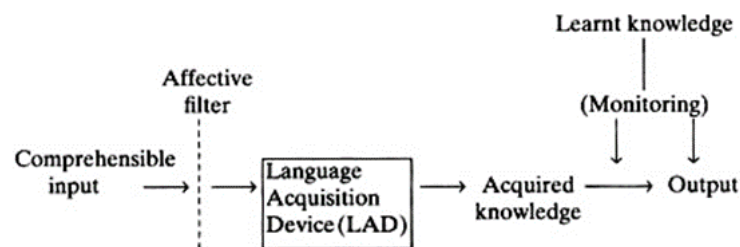
Therefore, this study aims to analyse how the *Let's Read* application supports young learners' Second Language Acquisition through the use of illustrated digital storybooks. Guided by this purpose, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do illustrated digital storybooks affect engagement and motivation in Second Language Acquisition?
2. How do illustrations in digital storybooks support vocabulary acquisition in young second language learners?
3. How does the *Let's Read* application enhance the overall Second Language Acquisition experience?

This study is expected to contribute to the field of SLA by providing qualitative insights into young learners' experiences with illustrated digital storybooks. The findings may inform educators in selecting effective digital resources, support researchers in understanding multimodal language learning, and offer guidance for educational technology developers in designing child-friendly and pedagogically meaningful language-learning applications.

### Theoretical Framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Human tendency to communicate and interact is not a phenomenon that emerges recently. These symptoms appear in line with the development of human civilization. Whether for the motive of developing power, politics, survival, and slavery; it has been a long time since humans are out of their closest social environment. This is what leads to the movement of people from one region to another, both in the form of individuals/families and in large waves.



*The Input Hypothesis Model of L2 learning and production (adapted from Krashen, 1982, pp. 16 and 32; and Gregg, 1984)*

According to Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, efficient learning requires understandable input, or language that is just a little bit beyond the learner's present competency ( $i+1$ ) (Krashen, 1982). This approach emphasises how crucial it is to give students resources that are both intelligible and sufficiently difficult to foster language development. In the context of recent studies, exposure to linguistic input that is somewhat beyond the learner's present level promotes learning (Gutiérrez-Colón & Alameh, 2024). Furthermore, including digital storytelling has been shown to improve students' interest and engagement, which aids in language learning even more (Barua, 2023).

In his sociocultural theory, Lev Vygotsky asserts that social contact and contextual clues are essential to language acquisition, and that the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) distinguishes between what students can do on their own and with help (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this concept, language development may be successfully scaffolded through group activities and supervised interactions. According to recent studies, digital storytelling can enhance students' engagement and language learning results, which is consistent with Vygotsky's focus on social interaction (Barua, 2023). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that the usage of digital storytelling increases learners' communication willingness, which is essential for language development (Yang & Wu, 2023).

### *Illustrated Digital Storybooks in Language Learning*

Due to its ability to accommodate a variety of learning styles and improve understanding, multimodal learning—which blends text and visuals—offers youngsters significant benefits. Combining words and images can improve comprehension more than using only words, according to Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2014). Through integrated language options and interactive elements, digital picture books have been shown in recent research to help youngsters improve their second-language proficiency (Neumann, 2022). Digital storytelling has also been shown to enhance young EFL learners' writing abilities and enthusiasm to study (Alismail, 2023).

By providing visual signals that enhance the text, illustrations help students understand new language and concepts. This dual coding of data can improve comprehension and memory. Studies have demonstrated that preliterate students utilise storybook images to comprehend narratives, underscoring the significance of visual components in language learning (Ismaili & Bajrami, 2023). Additionally, it has been discovered that digital storytelling supports the combination of textual and visual aspects and is useful and effective for learning second languages (Alameh, 2024).

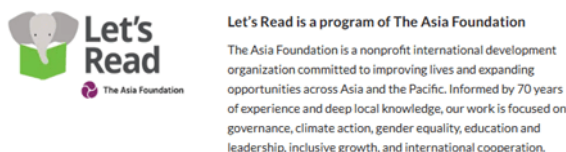


Figure 1. The Overview of Let's Read Application

Learning experiences are improved by digital tools such as the Let's Read app, which offer dynamic and captivating information that can be customised to meet the requirements of each individual student. In order to inspire students and expose them to a variety of language patterns, these platforms frequently incorporate features like audio narration, interactive components, and storytelling. Digital storytelling has been shown in studies to enhance language learning results and student engagement, making it an effective tool in language instruction (Barua, 2023). According to Yang and Wu (2023), digital storytelling has also been demonstrated to encourage communication willingness, which is crucial for language development.

#### ***Engagement and Motivation in SLA***

In order to keep language learners motivated and focused, visual components are essential. Information is processed by both verbal and nonverbal systems, according to Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, and learning can be improved by combining textual and visual information (Paivio, 2006). According to recent studies, integrating visual and aural components into digital storytelling might enhance learners' engagement and language learning results (Barua, 2023). According to Yang and Wu (2023), digital storytelling has also been shown to encourage communication willingness, which is essential for language learning.

Because learners may see their own experiences and origins mirrored in the curriculum, culturally relevant content develops engagement and a sense of connection. Learning a language can be more successful if motivation and engagement are raised by this significance. The significance of culturally appropriate content in language instruction is underscored by studies that demonstrate the impact of digital storytelling on learners' cultural identity formation (Alismail, 2023). The incorporation of cultural components into language training has also been supported by the effectiveness and advantages of digital storytelling for second language acquisition (Alameh, 2024).

## **2. Method**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring young learners' experiences, generating in-depth insights, and understanding complex phenomena in natural learning contexts. A descriptive qualitative approach allows researchers to capture rich, contextualised data through close observation and interaction, making it particularly suitable for investigating Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in elementary school settings (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Yin, 2003).

The participant of this study was a nine-year-old learner enrolled in the third grade of an Indonesian elementary school where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). English instruction in this context is limited and primarily focuses on basic vocabulary and simple sentence structures. Based on classroom observation and informal consultation with the classroom teacher, the participant's English proficiency can be categorised as beginner to early-emerging, particularly in reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition.

The learner had limited exposure to English outside the classroom and encountered English mainly through formal school instruction and occasional digital media. Prior to this study, the participant had minimal experience using illustrated digital storybook applications for language learning. The participant was purposefully selected, as early childhood represents a "golden period" of cognitive and linguistic development, making it an appropriate stage for examining the role of illustrated digital storybooks in supporting SLA.

To collect data, the researcher conducted classroom observation and employed a semi-structured interview as the primary research instrument to address the study's three research questions. The interview focused on the learner's experiences, perceptions, and responses toward the use of illustrated digital storybooks in the Let's Read application.

The data analysis followed the three key stages proposed by Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker (2014):

1. **Familiarising and Organising**, involving immersion in the data and systematic arrangement;
2. **Coding and Reducing**, focusing on identifying patterns and categorising meaningful units; and
3. **Interpreting and Representing**, aimed at drawing conclusions and presenting findings coherently.

This structured analytical process ensured that the data analysis remained systematic, transparent, and manageable, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Drawing on Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis as a theoretical framework, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview to examine the students' responses regarding the usage of Let's Read app's illustrative digital storybook for supporting SLA. As soon as the in-depth interview analysis was conducted, it was found that the students' responses were favourable. This finding validates the idea of input hypothesis by Krashen (1982), which indicates that learners are more likely to acquire language when they are exposed to messages that are engaging, intriguing, and personally meaningful to them. Furthermore, the researcher analysed the data following the three key stages proposed by Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker (2014)—familiarising and organising, coding and reducing, interpreting and representing.

#### 3.1 Investigating How Illustrated Storybooks Affect Engagement and Motivation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

To address the first research question—How do illustrated digital storybooks affect engagement and motivation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)?—the researcher analysed the learner's responses obtained through a semi-structured interview. Three key responses illustrate how illustrated digital storybooks in the Let's Read application influence engagement and motivation.

Table 1. The first result

<i>Researcher</i>	: <i>Do you feel excited when you start reading a story on this app? Why?</i>
<i>Student</i>	: <i>Yes, <b>curious</b> about the next storyline</i>

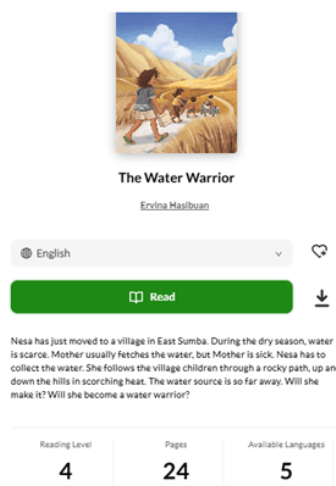


Figure 2. The Water Warrior cover, synopsis, and other details of the story

The learner's expression of curiosity indicates a strong sense of initial engagement when interacting with illustrated digital storybooks. Curiosity plays a crucial role in sustaining attention and encouraging learners to continue engaging with linguistic input. In this context, the illustrations function as visual stimuli that support comprehensible input by providing contextual cues, making the story more accessible and meaningful for the learner. Such engagement aligns with the notion that learners are more likely to acquire language when input is not only understandable but also emotionally engaging. The presence of a synopsis before the story begins, as shown in Figure 2, further supports engagement by activating prior knowledge and setting expectations for the narrative, thereby preparing the learner cognitively for language input.

Table 2. The second result:

<i>Researcher</i>	: <i>Do you enjoy looking at the pictures in story books? Why?</i>
<i>Student</i>	: <i>Yes, it is exciting, fun, and the pictures in the story <b>make me interested in the storyline</b></i>



One day, Nesa finds her mother laying sick in bed. She hurries to the kitchen to boil some water.

Figure 3. Background of the story



Soon, Nesa and her friends are on their way. They walk with hope that they will get clean water today.

Figure 4. Resolution of the problem faced

This response highlights the motivational role of illustrations in sustaining the learner’s interest throughout the reading process. The learner’s enjoyment suggests that visual elements reduce the cognitive effort required to process unfamiliar language by offering concrete representations of abstract meanings. From a multimodal learning perspective, the combination of visual and textual input supports deeper processing and facilitates comprehension. The illustrated scenes presented in Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate how visuals guide the learner’s understanding of narrative progression, enabling the learner to remain engaged even when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. This finding indicates that illustrations are not merely decorative but serve as pedagogical tools that promote sustained motivation in SLA contexts.

Table 3. The third result:

<i>Researcher</i>	: <i>Do you feel proud after finishing a story? Why or why not?</i>
<i>Student</i>	: <i>Yes, because <b>I can change stories and want to know many other stories that have been provided</b></i>



Before the sun sets, Nesa arrives home. "Mother, Mother, Look! I have water!" "I am so happy I can collect water today. I am a water warrior, Mother."

Figure 5. Resolution of the story as a symbol of pride

The learner's sense of pride after completing a story reflects the development of intrinsic motivation and a sense of achievement. Completing a story successfully appears to encourage the learner to explore additional content independently, indicating increased learner autonomy. This sense of accomplishment is significant in SLA, as positive emotional experiences can strengthen learners' willingness to continue engaging with language input. As illustrated in Figure 5, the resolution of the story symbolises closure and success, reinforcing the learner's confidence and readiness to engage with new linguistic challenges. Such experiences contribute to a positive learning cycle in which motivation, engagement, and continued exposure to language input mutually reinforce one another.

Overall, the findings from this section demonstrate that illustrated digital storybooks in the Let's Read application foster learner engagement and motivation by stimulating curiosity, providing visual support, and promoting a sense of achievement. These affective factors play a vital role in sustaining young learners' interaction with second language input, thereby supporting the early stages of Second Language Acquisition.

### 3.2 Examining How Illustrations in Digital Storybooks Support Vocabulary Acquisition in Young Second Language Learners

To address the second research question—How do illustrations in digital storybooks support vocabulary acquisition in young second language learners?—the researcher analysed two key interview responses that reveal how visual elements assist learners in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary and navigating language difficulty levels within the Let's Read application.

Table 4. The first result

<i>Researcher</i>	: <i>When you see a word you don't know, does the picture help you guess what it means? How?</i>
<i>Student</i>	: <i>Very helpful, <b>the movement tells me what it means</b></i>



Soon, everyone shouts in excitement.  
"Hurray! There's water!"

Where? Oh No! We still have to go down these sharp and steep rocks.

Ooops! Nesa almost slips.

Figure 6. Hardworking fellows with various illustrations and movements

The learner's response indicates that illustrations, particularly those depicting movement or action, function as effective semantic cues for interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. Visual representations of actions help bridge the gap between unknown lexical items and their meanings, enabling the learner to infer meaning without direct translation. This process reflects the role of visual scaffolding in vocabulary learning, where images reduce cognitive load and support meaning-making. From a multimedia learning perspective, the integration of animated or action-based visuals facilitates the construction of mental representations by linking verbal input with concrete visual information. As illustrated in Figure 6, the depiction of characters' actions provides contextual clues that guide the learner toward understanding new vocabulary, demonstrating how illustrations actively support vocabulary acquisition rather than serving as mere embellishments.

Table 5. The second result

<i>Researcher</i>	: <i>Do you think this app makes learning English easier or harder? Why?</i>
<i>Student</i>	: <i>Easier, because I can <b>understand English faster</b>, apart from the pictures, this app also <b>has levels from the easiest to the hardest</b></i>

This response highlights how illustrations work in combination with structured content progression to support vocabulary development. The learner's perception that English becomes easier suggests that visual support accelerates comprehension, allowing attention to shift from decoding individual words to understanding overall meaning. Additionally, the application's graded levels reflect a scaffolded learning approach, where vocabulary difficulty increases

gradually. Such structuring aligns with the principle that learners benefit from input that progresses from familiar to more complex forms. By matching visual cues with level-appropriate vocabulary, the Let’s Read application helps learners acquire new lexical items within their developmental capacity, supporting steady and confidence-building vocabulary growth.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that illustrations in digital storybooks play a crucial role in supporting vocabulary acquisition among young second language learners. Visual cues assist learners in inferring meaning, reduce reliance on translation, and enable learners to process unfamiliar words within meaningful contexts. When combined with a structured progression of difficulty, illustrated digital storybooks provide effective lexical scaffolding that supports vocabulary development during the early stages of Second Language Acquisition.

### 3.3 Assessing How the Let’s Read App Enhances the Overall SLA Experience

To address the third research question—How does the Let’s Read application enhance the overall Second Language Acquisition (SLA) experience? —the researcher analysed two interview responses that reflect the learner’s overall perception of using the application as a language-learning tool.

Table 6. The first result:

<i>Researcher</i>	<i>: Do you want to read more stories using this application? Why?</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>: Yes, because there are <b>many other exciting stories and can broaden my insight</b>. Then, this application has also classified each theme so that the stories are not mixed, for example: folk tales from various countries, stories about building character, and fictional stories</i>



Figure 7. Categorisation of the stories in the Let’s Read app

The learner’s response demonstrates a strong willingness to continue engaging with the application, indicating sustained motivation and positive learning engagement. The thematic categorisation of stories supports learner autonomy by allowing the learner to select content based on personal interest, which can enhance motivation and reduce cognitive overload. Organised story themes also help learners anticipate content and linguistic patterns, making language input

more accessible and meaningful. This structured organisation aligns with the principle that comprehensible and well-sequenced input supports effective language acquisition. Furthermore, exposure to culturally diverse stories broadens the learner's perspective, suggesting that the application supports not only linguistic development but also cultural awareness within the SLA process.

Table 7. The second result

<i>Researcher</i>	: Overall, how do you feel about using the Let's Read app to learn English?
<i>Student</i>	: <b>Fun and no ads</b>

Although brief, this response provides meaningful insight into the learner's overall learning experience. Describing the application as "fun" reflects a positive emotional response, which is essential in sustaining long-term engagement with language learning activities. The absence of advertisements contributes to a distraction-free environment, allowing the learner to maintain focus on the learning task without interruptions. From a multimedia learning perspective, reducing extraneous elements helps minimise unnecessary cognitive load, enabling learners to allocate more cognitive resources to processing language input. An ad-free environment, therefore, enhances immersion and supports a more effective and enjoyable learning experience.

To sum up, the findings indicate that the Let's Read application enhances the SLA experience by combining organised content, learner choice, cultural diversity, and a distraction-free digital environment. These features foster sustained motivation, learner autonomy, and focused engagement, all of which are essential for effective language acquisition. The application's design demonstrates how thoughtfully structured digital platforms can support young learners' SLA by creating enjoyable, meaningful, and accessible language-learning experiences.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that illustrated digital storybooks, as exemplified by the Let's Read application, play a meaningful role in supporting young learners' Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The findings indicate that the integration of visual illustrations, thematic organisation, and interactive storytelling fosters learner engagement, sustains motivation, and supports vocabulary acquisition by providing contextualised and comprehensible language input. By creating an enjoyable, structured, and low-distraction learning environment, illustrated digital storybooks encourage sustained interaction with second language input during the early stages of language development.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The findings are based on a single participant within a specific elementary school context, which limits the generalisability of the results. Additionally, the study relied on short-term observation and interview data, without longitudinal tracking of language development over time. Future research may involve a larger number of participants, extended observation periods, and mixed-method approaches to examine the long-term impact of illustrated digital storybooks on various aspects of Second Language Acquisition.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that educators may consider integrating illustrated digital storybooks into early language learning classrooms to enhance engagement and provide visual scaffolding for vocabulary development. Parents may also utilise such applications to support language exposure beyond the classroom in a guided and meaningful way. For educational technology developers, the results highlight the importance of age-appropriate content, clear thematic organisation, rich visual support, and distraction-free design in developing effective digital tools for young language learners.

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