



Picture Media as a Cognitive Tool for Conceptual Understanding in Primary Education

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Abstract:

Primary school students are generally developing their ability to understand concepts through concrete experiences, making visual learning media relevant for supporting conceptual understanding. Picture media can provide concrete representations that help students connect instructional information with observable learning experiences. This study aimed to describe the implementation of picture media in learning, examine its contribution to students' learning outcomes, and explore students' subjective learning experiences when picture media were used. This study employed a qualitative case study design. Participants consisted of a third-grade classroom teacher and students. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation and analyzed through data condensation, data display, and verification. The findings showed that picture media were systematically integrated into introductory, core, and evaluation activities. Their use was associated with increased student attention, participation, engagement, and learning achievement. Students also reported that picture-supported learning was more interesting, enjoyable, and easier to understand. The study indicates that picture media can function not merely as supplementary teaching aids but as pedagogical resources that facilitate conceptual understanding and meaningful learning experiences. The findings contribute to visual-learning scholarship and provide practical guidance for teachers in designing concrete, interactive, and developmentally appropriate primary learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays an essential role in developing students' cognitive abilities, conceptual understanding, and capacity to engage meaningfully with learning. At the elementary level, students increasingly encounter concepts that require them to connect new information with observable experiences. Visual learning can support this process by presenting information in forms that are easier to observe, interpret, and relate to classroom experiences. Research has shown that visual materials can support learning processes in primary education by facilitating students' interaction with instructional content (Islam & Salam, 2023; Syahara et al., 2026; Qodriah & Prahasti, 2026). Visual learning is also associated with students' creative thinking and problem-solving development (Yeboah & Abonyi, 2026; Aminah et al., 2025; Fahriansyah et al.,

2025). Therefore, the appropriate use of visual media is important not merely for presenting information, but for creating learning experiences that support students' understanding and active engagement in primary classrooms.

Despite the potential of visual learning, primary school instruction may still rely heavily on verbal explanations and conventional teacher-centered practices. Such approaches can make some learning concepts difficult for students to visualize, particularly when instructional content involves ideas that cannot be directly observed. The problem is not simply the availability of learning media, but how teachers select and integrate media into meaningful classroom activities. Previous research indicates that instructional media can influence students' learning interest and outcomes, but the effectiveness of media depends on how they are incorporated into the learning process (Sajma et al., 2026; Indrawati et al., 2026; Fikriyah & Prahasti, 2026; Prahasti et al., 2026). Consequently, the challenge for primary education is to move beyond using visual materials as decorative or supplementary resources and instead employ them purposefully to facilitate comprehension, participation, and meaningful learning experiences.

In the classroom examined in this study, picture media were incorporated into learning activities rather than being used only as supplementary illustrations. The teacher employed pictures during introductory activities to stimulate students' attention, during core activities to represent learning concepts, and during evaluation to support students in completing tasks. Classroom observations indicated that students became more attentive and participative when pictures were presented. Students also appeared more willing to ask questions, respond to explanations, and express their understanding. In addition, students described picture-supported learning as more interesting and easier to understand than learning based solely on verbal explanations. This classroom phenomenon suggests that simple picture media can become an integral component of learning when deliberately connected to instructional objectives. However, understanding how this process supports students' construction of understanding requires investigation beyond observable learning outcomes alone.

Previous studies have demonstrated the instructional value of visual media in primary education. Ruma Bay et al. (2022) and Mukarromah et al. (2025) found that visual media supported improved learning outcomes among primary school students, while Selfia et al. (2026) reported positive effects of audiovisual media on elementary students' learning outcomes. Research has also highlighted broader benefits of visual learning. Yeboah and Abonyi (2026) linked visual learning with creative thinking and problem-solving, whereas Sajma et al. (2026) associated instructional media with increased learning interest. These studies establish that visual resources can support cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. However, much of the existing research emphasizes effectiveness, achievement, or interest as measurable outcomes. Less attention has been given to the classroom process through which simple picture media are integrated and how students experience and construct understanding through such representations.

The existing literature therefore provides substantial evidence regarding the benefits of visual learning but leaves an important process-oriented gap. Islam and Salam (2023) and Muzammil & Susanti (2025) demonstrated the relevance of visual materials in classroom teaching, while Syahara et al. (2026) emphasized the role of visual aids in primary education. Berardinetti (2026) and Nazwa et al. (2025) similarly identified visual tools as valuable resources for enhancing learning and broader skill development. Nevertheless, previous studies have frequently examined visual media through

experimental, quasi-experimental, or literature-based perspectives, with greater emphasis on learning outcomes than on students' lived classroom experiences. This creates a need for research that explains how picture media function within actual instructional interactions and how students interpret visual representations during learning. Addressing this gap is important because understanding the learning process can complement outcome-based evidence and provide a more comprehensive explanation of the pedagogical role of picture media in primary education.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning picture media not merely as instructional aids or tools for improving academic outcomes, but as pedagogical resources that facilitate the construction of understanding through classroom interaction. The study specifically examines how pictures are integrated across learning stages, how they help students connect verbal explanations with concrete representations, and how students perceive their learning experiences when visual media are used. This perspective moves beyond asking whether picture media are effective and instead examines how their pedagogical function emerges during actual learning. By focusing on a third-grade classroom, the study also provides a contextual account of visual learning among students who benefit from concrete representations. This process-oriented perspective is important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of picture media as cognitive and pedagogical resources in primary education.

This study addresses the problem of how picture media contribute to students' understanding beyond their observable effects on learning outcomes. It argues that the educational value of picture media emerges when teachers deliberately connect visual representations with learning objectives, classroom explanations, student interaction, and learning tasks. Accordingly, the study examines three interconnected aspects: how picture media are implemented in third-grade learning, how their use contributes to students' construction of understanding, and how students experience learning through visual representations. The study contributes a process-based explanation of visual learning by connecting instructional implementation with students' cognitive and experiential responses. Such an approach can provide teachers with a clearer basis for using picture media purposefully and can support schools in developing learning practices that are more concrete, interactive, meaningful, and responsive to the learning characteristics of primary school students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the use of picture media in learning and its contribution to students' understanding. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on describing learning experiences, classroom interactions, and participants' perspectives within their natural context. Qualitative descriptive research emphasizes the systematic description of participants' experiences and meanings, while a case study enables researchers to examine a bounded phenomenon comprehensively within its real-life setting (Stanley, 2023; Villamin et al., 2025). The case study design was selected because the research concentrated on picture-media utilization in a specific third-grade classroom. Case study research allows researchers to investigate a particular case through detailed and contextualized data collection (Miller et al., 2023; Viera, 2023). Purposive sampling was used to select participants directly involved in the learning process (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Putra & Soma, 2025).

The study was conducted at an elementary school in Jombang District, Jember Regency, East Java, Indonesia, from February to July 2026. The research site was purposively selected because the school incorporated picture media into classroom learning, making it relevant to the research focus. The setting also provided adequate access for conducting observations, interviews, and documentation throughout the study. The participants consisted of one third-grade classroom teacher and students who participated in learning activities using picture media. Participant selection was based on their direct involvement and experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is appropriate when researchers intentionally select information-rich participants who can provide relevant insights into the research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Magnone & Yeziarski, 2024). Such sampling also supports contextual understanding by prioritizing participants with meaningful knowledge of the studied phenomenon (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Sudrajat et al., 2026).

Data were collected through classroom observation, interviews, and document analysis to obtain comprehensive information from multiple sources. Observation was conducted during learning activities to examine how picture media were used, students' participation, classroom interactions, task completion, and responses to learning materials. Participant observation can provide direct access to naturally occurring behaviors and interactions within the research setting (Da Costa et al., 2024; Elhamma, 2024). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and selected students. Teacher interviews explored the implementation of picture media, perceived effects on students' understanding, and learning challenges, while student interviews examined learning experiences, perceptions, motivation, and the perceived ease of understanding the material. In addition, documents such as teaching modules, student worksheets, assessment results, and photographs were examined as supporting evidence. Combining interviews, observations, and documents strengthens qualitative case study data collection (Alam, 2021; Chand, 2025).

Data were analyzed interactively through data condensation, data display, and verification to identify patterns and meanings related to picture-media utilization. During data condensation, information obtained from observations, interviews, and documents was selected, organized, coded, and focused according to the research objectives. Relevant statements concerning media use, student participation, learning experiences, and understanding were retained, while unrelated information was excluded. The condensed data were then displayed descriptively and thematically to facilitate comparison across participants and data sources. Case study analysis benefits from systematic organization of multiple forms of qualitative evidence to develop a coherent understanding of the case (Alam, 2021; Miller et al., 2023). Finally, verification involved examining emerging patterns, comparing evidence across sources, and reviewing interpretations against the collected data. Triangulation of observation, interview, and documentary evidence was used to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION (Calibri Light size 12)

Result

The results of the study show several data findings obtained from related resource persons, namely classroom teachers (ZF) and all grade III students in one of the

elementary schools located in Jember Regency. This research also focuses on the three research objectives as the basis for data collection. The findings can be seen in figure 1 below.

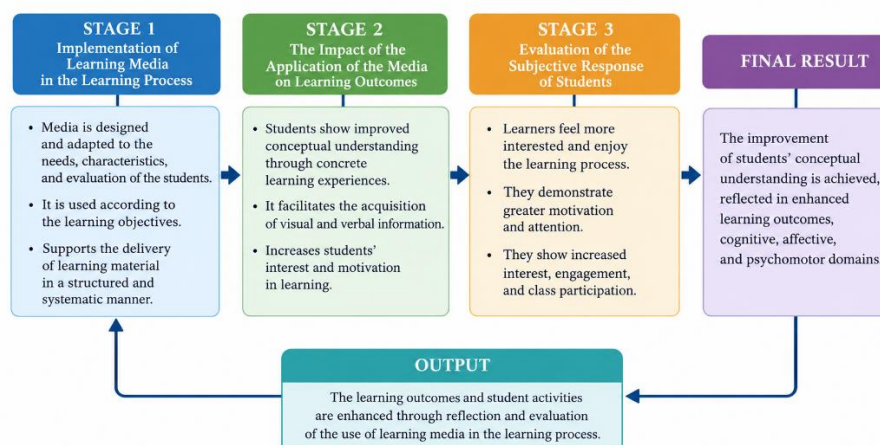


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Utilization of Image Media in Learning

Figure 1 illustrates a cyclical and systematic learning process in which the implementation of learning media serves as the initial foundation for improving students' conceptual understanding and learning experiences. Its use, aligned with instructional objectives and students' needs, facilitates the integration of visual and verbal information while creating more concrete and structured learning experiences. These effects are further reflected in students' subjective responses, particularly through increased interest, motivation, attention, engagement, and classroom participation. Collectively, these processes contribute to enhanced learning outcomes across the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Importantly, the feedback mechanism indicates that learning outcomes and student experiences are not merely end products but also serve as evaluative inputs for refining the subsequent use of learning media, thereby establishing a continuous cycle of implementation, evaluation, reflection, and instructional improvement.

Implementation of Picture Media in Learning

Picture media were implemented in a planned and systematic manner throughout the learning process. Rather than using pictures merely as supplementary materials, the teacher integrated them into the introductory, core, and evaluation activities. During the introductory stage, pictures were used as initial stimuli to attract students' attention and generate curiosity about the learning topic. During the core activities, pictures were used to make concepts more concrete when they had previously been explained verbally. During the evaluation stage, pictures served as visual guides that supported students in completing exercises and individual tasks. Classroom observations showed that the pictures were directly related to the learning indicators, enabling students to connect verbal information with visual representations. The teacher also selected pictures that were simple, clear, and appropriate for elementary school students. This implementation positioned picture media as a visual bridge between the learning material presented by the teacher and students' understanding of the concepts being taught.

Impact of Picture Media on Learning Outcomes

The use of picture media was associated with increased student engagement during the learning process. When pictures were presented, students appeared more attentive to the material, while classroom distractions decreased and learning activities became more focused. Observations also showed increased student participation, particularly through asking questions, responding to the teacher's explanations, and expressing opinions. Classroom interaction consequently became more dynamic rather than being dominated by teacher explanations. Interview findings supported these observations. The teacher explained that picture media helped students understand the material more quickly than verbal explanation alone because the pictures served as a "concrete bridge" connecting verbal information with visual representations. Students therefore found it easier to identify the main ideas and understand the concepts presented. Documentary evidence from students' grade records also indicated improvements in daily assessment performance and learning completion after picture media were implemented. According to the teacher, students demonstrated better achievement in classroom evaluations than before the use of picture media.

Students' Subjective Experiences in Learning

Students generally reported positive learning experiences when picture media were used. Most students described the learning activities as more interesting and enjoyable because they could directly observe visual examples related to the material. The pictures also helped them understand concepts without having to construct mental images solely from the teacher's verbal explanations. Students further reported that visual representations made the learning material easier to remember because the information was supported by clear and recognizable images. They also perceived a noticeable difference between learning with and without picture media. According to the students, lessons without visual media were sometimes confusing and more difficult to understand, whereas lessons supported by pictures were easier to follow and increased their enthusiasm for learning. Although the teacher reported that students' high enthusiasm occasionally made the classroom noisier, the students did not identify picture media as a source of difficulty in understanding the material. Instead, they considered the pictures sufficiently clear and engaging to support their learning.

Discussion

The findings indicate that picture media were systematically integrated into the introductory, core, and evaluation stages of learning. This finding is consistent with Islam and Salam (2023), who showed that visual materials can be integrated into classroom teaching to support the presentation and understanding of learning content. It also corresponds with Syahara et al. (2026), who emphasized the role of visual aids in supporting primary education. However, this study extends previous research by describing how picture media were incorporated across different stages of classroom instruction rather than examining visual media only as an instructional intervention. The finding further supports Piagetian perspectives that primary school students benefit from concrete representations during the concrete operational stage (Oogarah-Pratap et al., 2025; Hayat et al., 2024). Thus, the contribution of this study lies in showing that the pedagogical value of pictures depends not only on their presence but also on their purposeful integration into classroom activities.

The study further found that picture media helped students understand learning materials more easily and were accompanied by improved learning achievement. This finding is consistent with Ruma Bay et al. (2022), who reported that visual media supported improved primary school students' learning outcomes. Similarly, Selfia et al. (2026) found that audiovisual media contributed to learning outcomes in elementary education. However, the present study differs from these outcome-oriented studies because it focuses on the process through which visual representations supported students' understanding during classroom learning. The findings can also be interpreted through Dual Coding Theory, as visual and verbal information may provide complementary representations that facilitate comprehension and recall (Wooten & Cuevas, 2024; Suryanto & Kusnandar, 2025). Rather than positioning pictures merely as tools for improving scores, this study identifies their function as a cognitive bridge connecting teacher explanations with concrete representations. This process-oriented explanation constitutes an important contribution to research on visual learning in primary classrooms.

The increased attention and participation observed when picture media were presented are consistent with previous research emphasizing the broader instructional value of visual learning. Yeboah and Abonyi (2026) reported that teachers' use of visual learning can support pupils' creative thinking and problem-solving, suggesting that visual resources may encourage active cognitive engagement rather than passive reception of information. Similarly, Sajma et al. (2026) found that audiovisual media can increase students' learning interest. The present findings support these studies by showing increased questioning, responses, and student participation during picture-supported instruction. Nevertheless, this study provides a different perspective because it examines simple picture media within ordinary classroom activities rather than audiovisual or more technologically mediated resources. This distinction suggests that meaningful visual learning does not necessarily require sophisticated technology. The contribution of this study is therefore the identification of teacher-guided picture use as a practical mechanism for encouraging classroom interaction and student engagement in primary education.

Students' positive experiences with picture-supported learning also correspond with research emphasizing the relationship between visual resources and students' interest in learning. Sajma et al. (2026) and Indrawati et al. (2026) demonstrate that instructional media can support students' interest alongside learning outcomes. The present findings extend this evidence by capturing students' subjective experiences, including their perceptions that pictures made lessons more enjoyable, understandable, and easier to remember. This emphasis differs from studies that primarily evaluate learning outcomes through quantitative measures. The findings also align with the view that learning is influenced by the interaction between cognitive processing and students' engagement with learning materials. However, the present study shows that positive experiences were not entirely free from classroom challenges, as students' enthusiasm occasionally contributed to increased classroom noise. This finding adds contextual nuance by showing that greater engagement may require teacher regulation rather than being treated as an exclusively positive outcome.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that picture media function beyond their conventional role as supplementary teaching aids. Their contribution emerges through three interconnected processes: providing concrete representations, facilitating

student understanding, and encouraging active engagement. This interpretation is consistent with the literature on visual learning in primary education (Islam & Salam, 2023; Syahara et al., 2026) and with evidence that visual media can support learning outcomes and higher-order learning processes (Ruma Bay et al., 2022; Yeboah & Abonyi, 2026). The novelty of this study lies in connecting these dimensions within one classroom case and explaining how picture media operate as a cognitive bridge between verbal explanations and students' concrete learning experiences. In contrast to previous studies that predominantly emphasize effectiveness or achievement, this study contributes a process-oriented account of how visual media are implemented and experienced. The findings therefore strengthen the conceptual understanding of picture media as both instructional and cognitive resources.

The study contributes to visual-learning research by providing an empirically grounded explanation of picture media use in a primary classroom, particularly through the relationship between implementation, comprehension, engagement, and students' learning experiences. Practically, the findings suggest that teachers should select clear, relevant, and developmentally appropriate pictures and integrate them purposefully throughout learning activities rather than using them only as supplementary illustrations. This recommendation is consistent with the broader literature emphasizing the instructional potential of visual resources in primary education (Syahara et al., 2026; Berardinetti, 2026). Nevertheless, the contribution should be interpreted within the boundaries of a single-classroom case study. The findings cannot be generalized directly to all primary school contexts because classroom characteristics, teacher practices, and student backgrounds may differ. Future research could examine picture-media implementation across multiple schools, subjects, and grade levels and investigate its relationship with specific dimensions of learning through comparative or mixed-method designs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that picture media function not merely as visual teaching aids but as pedagogical resources that help primary school students connect verbal information with concrete representations, construct conceptual understanding, and engage more actively in learning. The main lesson from the findings is that the value of picture media depends on their purposeful integration into learning activities rather than their simple presence in the classroom. The implication of the findings is that teachers can use clear, relevant, and developmentally appropriate pictures to support meaningful, interactive, and contextually grounded learning experiences. Scientifically, this study contributes a process-oriented perspective by explaining how picture media facilitate understanding and learning experiences, rather than focusing only on academic outcomes. However, the study is limited to one third-grade classroom in a single elementary school, restricting the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Future research should examine multiple schools, grade levels, subjects, and learner characteristics using comparative or mixed-method approaches to develop a broader understanding of picture-based learning.

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research. May this study contribute to the development of education, particularly elementary school learning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study or its publication.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

AI-assisted (grammarly) tools were used solely to support English translation and language refinement.

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