

Reimagining ESL Literature Instruction: A *Harry Potter* Case Study in Film and Text Integration

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Abstract

The integration of literature into English as a Second Language (ESL) education has long been recognized for its benefits in providing authentic language exposure, fostering cultural awareness, and developing critical thinking skills. However, traditional literary instruction often struggles to maintain student engagement, particularly in multimedia-oriented learning environments. This study examines how visual storytelling, particularly film adaptations, can enhance the effectiveness of literary education in ESL by overcoming language barriers, providing contextual support, and promoting deeper narrative comprehension.

As a case study, the popular *Harry Potter* book and film series was chosen, and the research employs a mixed-methods approach, analyzing responses from 127 high school and college students regarding their interaction with the selected books and films. The findings reveal significant differences between viewers who only watched the films and those who also read the books. Readers demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of themes, characters, and narrative structure, whereas film viewers primarily perceived the story as action-driven and straightforward. The presented statistical analyses convincingly confirm the well-established fact that film can serve as an entry point into literature but does not replace the cognitive and linguistic benefits of reading. However, they also highlight the specific areas of perception, comprehension, and interpretation where the greatest differences lie between the textual and visual presentation of the story.

The study advocates for a balanced pedagogical approach in which film is not a substitute for literature but a complementary tool to enhance student comprehension and motivation. Recommended strategies include guided comparative analysis, multimodal assignments, and creative student engagement with the text. The findings contribute to a broader discussion on multimodal education and provide valuable insights for optimizing ESL instruction through the integration of literary and visual storytelling.

Keywords: ESL education, integration of literature, visual storytelling, film adaptations, Harry Potter series, multimedia instruction, multimodal education, student motivation, pedagogical strategies, interpretation of literary texts

Abstrakt

Integrace literatury do výuky angličtiny jako druhého jazyka (ESL) je dlouhodobě uznávaná pro svůj přínos v oblasti autentického jazykového kontaktu, rozvoje kulturního povědomí a kritického myšlení. Tradiční literární výuka však často naráží na problém udržení zájmu studentů, zejména v multimediálně orientovaném vzdělávacím prostředí. Tato studie zkoumá, jak vizuální vyprávění příběhů, zejména filmové adaptace, mohou zvýšit efektivitu literárního vzdělávání v ESL tím, že překonávají jazykové bariéry, poskytují kontextuální oporu a podporují hlubší vnímání příběhu.

Jako případová studie byla zvolena populární série knih a filmů o *Harrym Potterovi*, přičemž výzkum využívá smíšenou metodologii, analyzující odpovědi 127 studentů středních a vysokých škol ohledně jejich interakce se zvolenými knihami a filmy. Výsledky ukazují výrazné rozdíly mezi diváky, kteří sledovali pouze filmy, a těmi, kteří četli i knihy. Čtenáři vykazovali propracovanější porozumění tématům, postavám a narativní struktuře, zatímco diváci filmů vnímali příběh převážně jako akčně orientovaný a přímočarý. Předkládané statistické analýzy přesvědčivě potvrzují známý fakt, že film může sloužit jako vstupní bod do literatury, ale nenahrazuje kognitivní a jazykové přínosy četby. Ukazují však také, v kterých oblastech vnímání, porozumění a interpretace příběhu leží největší rozdíly mezi jeho textovou a vizuální prezentací.

Studie prosazuje vyvážený pedagogický přístup, v němž film neslouží jako náhrada literatury, ale jako podpůrný nástroj pro zlepšení porozumění a motivace studentů. Mezi doporučené strategie patří řízená komparativní analýza, multimodální úkoly a kreativní zapojení studentů do práce s textem. Výsledky přispívají k širší diskuzi o multimodálním vzdělávání a poskytují užitečné poznatky pro optimalizaci výuky ESL prostřednictvím integrace literárního a vizuálního vyprávění.

Klíčová slova: ESL vzdělávání, integrace literatury, vizuální vyprávění, filmové adaptace, *Harry Potter*, multimediální výuka, multimodální vzdělávání, motivace studentů, pedagogické strategie, interpretace literárních textů

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Introduction

It has been almost forty years since the publication of Collie and Slater's seminal work on integrating literature into the language classroom, *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities* (1987). Their pioneering arguments about the value of literary texts in language learning—such as exposing students to authentic language, developing cultural awareness, and fostering critical thinking—remain influential in the field. However, as the dynamics of language education have evolved, so too have the challenges of maintaining student engagement and addressing diverse learning needs in increasingly multimedia-oriented classrooms.

While Collie and Slater emphasized the benefits of literature as a resource for language education, contemporary research suggests that relying solely on literary texts may not be sufficient to motivate today's students. This paper builds on their foundational ideas by proposing that visual storytelling, including film adaptations, animations, and other multimedia formats, can play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of literary texts in English as a Second Language (ESL) education.

The integration of visual storytelling addresses key challenges identified by educators and researchers: bridging the gap between students' linguistic proficiency and the complexity of literary language, creating emotional connections with the material, and accommodating diverse learning preferences. Rather than replacing literary texts, visuals serve as a complementary tool that enriches comprehension, provides context, and stimulates creative engagement with the written word. This study examines these dynamics through the lens of the *Harry Potter* series, exploring how the combination of literary texts and visual storytelling can foster motivation, improve language acquisition, and create a dynamic, multimodal learning environment. Through practical examples and evidence from classroom applications, it argues for a balanced approach where literature and visuals work together to inspire and educate learners.

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore student engagement with the *Harry Potter* series across various media formats. Conducted between 2024 and 2025 at Silesian University in Opava, the study involved 127 respondents (86 female [67.7%] and 41

male [32.3%]) from high school and college levels. This demographic was chosen for its significant role in secondlanguage acquisition and literary exposure. All participants demonstrated a minimum language proficiency level of B2.

The questionnaire focused on multiple aspects of engagement with the *Harry Potter* series, assessing participants' familiarity with the narrative and their preferred medium of consumption:

- Whether respondents had watched the films, read the books, or both;
- Which character they most identified with and why;
- How they perceived the main themes of the story;
- Their understanding of character motivations and moral complexity;
- Their reflections on the structure of the narrative across films and books;
- Whether their engagement with the Harry Potter series had influenced their broader interest in literature and language learning.

Additionally, demographic data, including gender, were collected to facilitate comparative analysis of engagement patterns.

The instrument utilized both structured multiple-choice questions and open-ended responses to capture a nuanced understanding of literary interaction. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, including mean scores (μ), standard deviations (σ), and frequency distributions, to identify overarching trends. To assess the statistical significance of response variations across gender, Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2) was employed, using a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. The chi-square calculations indicated no statistically significant differences solely based on demographic factors ($\chi^2 = 3.24$, $p = 0.21$). However, a substantive divergence emerged upon examining the distinction between respondents who engaged with the story exclusively through film and those who supplemented their experience with the books ($\chi^2 = 19.87$, $p < 0.001$). This divergence underscored meaningful contrasts in character identification, perceived thematic complexity, and overall narrative immersion.

In addition to quantitative analysis, the study incorporated a narrative reflection (NR) approach, conducted following the collection of questionnaire results and a subsequent discussion of the findings, allowing students to express their personal experiences with the learning process through storytelling. This method captured their subjective perceptions of progress, emotional engagement with the material, and shifts in motivation over time. The reflections provided qualitative depth to the numerical findings, offering insight into how students themselves perceived the impact of multimodal engagement on their learning process.

Research results

The analysis revealed distinct patterns of engagement and interpretation across different groups of respondents. Seven key areas emerged from the data analysis, each showing statistically significant differences between film-only viewers and those who engaged with both books and films:

Gender-Based Trends in Character Identification

Among male respondents, 36 (87.8%) identified with male characters, whereas only 3 (7.3%) identified with female characters. Among female respondents, 52 (60.5%) identified with female characters, while 35 (40.7%) identified with male characters. A chi-square test confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.03$, $p = 0.00052$), reinforcing the hypothesis that readers tend to identify with characters of their own gender. However, the data also indicate that female respondents were more flexible in their identification patterns compared to their male counterparts. One female respondent noted: *"I really connected with Hermione because she was smart and determined, but I also admired Snape's complexity."* In contrast, a male respondent stated: *"I could only really see myself in Harry or maybe Ron. The female characters didn't feel as relatable."*

Perceived Thematic Complexity

Film-only viewers primarily described the *Harry Potter* series in simple, action-driven terms, often reducing it to a straightforward battle between good and evil. In contrast, book readers identified deeper moral ambiguities and societal themes, such as discrimination and class structure. A chi-square test confirmed a highly significant difference in thematic engagement ($\chi^2 = 19.87$, $p < 0.001$). One book reader reflected: *"Snape's story arc is one of sacrifice and moral complexity; his motivations are never purely good or evil."* In contrast, a film-only viewer remarked: *"It's about Harry being the chosen one and fighting Voldemort. Everything leads to that."*

Character Understanding and Emotional Connection

Film-only viewers tended to focus on protagonists and high-energy sequences, with many expressing admiration for characters based on their heroic or comedic roles (e.g., *"Harry is brave," "Ron is funny"*). In contrast, book readers were more likely to cite secondary characters such as Lupin, Neville, or even house-elves like Dobby. Many emphasized their emotional development and internal struggles, rather than just their outward

actions. The chisquare results showed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 14.52$, $p = 0.0024$) between the two groups in terms of character perception, confirming that book readers engage with a wider range of characters on a deeper level. One book reader explained: *“Neville’s development is incredible. He starts out timid, but by the end, he’s one of the bravest characters.”* A film viewer, in contrast, stated: *“Neville was just kind of there for comic relief until the last movie.”*

Narrative Structure and Storytelling Interpretation

When asked about the structure of the *Harry Potter* series, film-only viewers often described the films as linear, action-driven stories, whereas book readers emphasized the intricate subplots and foreshadowing present in J. K. Rowling’s writing. A film-only respondent commented: *“Each movie has its own plot and climax, with the final battle as the biggest moment.”* In contrast, a book reader noted: *“Rowling weaves clues across the series—Snape’s actions in book one gain new meaning in the final book.”* Statistical analysis showed a strong difference in structural awareness ($\chi^2 = 17.32$, $p = 0.00093$), indicating that reading fosters a more holistic understanding of storytelling.

Moral and Ethical Interpretation

Film-only viewers were more likely to categorize characters as outright heroes or villains, whereas book readers often discussed moral dilemmas and shifting perspectives. When discussing Dumbledore, one film viewer remarked: *“He’s the wise mentor guiding Harry.”* A book reader countered: *“Dumbledore manipulates people for the greater good—his ethics are questionable.”* This resulted in a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 16.48$, $p = 0.0012$), showing that reading expands ethical and moral reasoning beyond simple dichotomies.

Engagement and Long-Term Interest

A large proportion of film-only viewers reported that their interest in *Harry Potter* faded after watching the last movie, whereas book readers were more likely to continue engaging with the material through fan content, rereads, and analysis. One book reader noted: *“I still reread the series every few years and find new details I missed before.”* In contrast, a film viewer stated: *“Once the last movie ended, that was it for me.”* The chi-square results confirmed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 15.87$, $p = 0.0021$), suggesting that books cultivate a more enduring connection to the material.

Motivation and Learning Outcomes

In terms of language acquisition, film-only viewers were more likely to state that watching the movies helped their listening comprehension, while book readers reported improvements in vocabulary, reading fluency, and writing skills. A film viewer commented: *"I picked up on accents and speech patterns."* A book reader, however, explained: *"Reading expanded my vocabulary—Rowling's writing taught me complex sentence structures."* The chi-square test showed a clear division in perceived learning benefits ($\chi^2 = 18.04$, $p = 0.00078$), indicating that reading provides a broader linguistic benefit beyond listening skills.

Summary of Key Findings

These findings underscore the distinct but complementary roles of film and literature in ESL education. The results consistently demonstrate that book readers engage with the material on a deeper level across all measured dimensions – from character analysis to thematic interpretation. The significant statistical differences in all six examined areas highlight that while film can serve as a powerful entry point into literature, it should not be used as a standalone replacement for deeper literary engagement. Particularly noteworthy is the finding that gender plays a substantial role in character identification patterns, with female readers showing greater flexibility in their character associations than their male counterparts.

Pedagogical Implications

The role of motivation in language acquisition cannot be overstated, as it is one of the key factors influencing students' engagement and success in second-language learning. Jůvová and Duda (2017) emphasize that strategies for learning a foreign language encompass a range of techniques, activities, and behaviors that learners deliberately employ to enhance their learning experience. These strategies not only support and expedite the learning process but also contribute to making it more engaging and effective. Building on this understanding, our findings suggest that integrating film and literature in a complementary manner provides effective scaffolding for ESL learners. Rather than treating film as a mere supplement to literature, educators can use visual storytelling as a bridge to textual complexity, particularly for students who may struggle with linguistic barriers. This method aligns with cognitive theories of dual-coding (Paivio, 2006), where combining verbal and visual input enhances comprehension and retention.

Foundation-Building Strategies

Reversing traditional sequencing, instead of introducing literary texts first, as has been traditionally practiced, teachers can begin by screening key film scenes to establish emotional engagement and contextual understanding. This approach helps lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and makes complex literary content more accessible. By providing visual context before textual analysis, students build confidence in their comprehension abilities.

Guided comparative analysis builds on initial visual engagement by comparing specific passages from novels with their film counterparts, promoting critical thinking and textual analysis skills. For example, analyzing the portrayal of Snape's backstory in *The Deathly Hallows* book versus film adaptation leads to rich discussions on narrative depth, character development, and thematic elements. These comparative exercises help students recognize the unique strengths of each medium while developing analytical skills.

Engagement Enhancement

Creative multimodal assignments position students as co-creators rather than passive consumers of content, increasing engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Tasks such as rewriting scenes from alternative perspectives, creating different endings, or producing short film adaptations of literary excerpts allow students to interact with texts on a deeper level. These creative exercises reinforce both language skills and narrative understanding.

Gamified learning approaches incorporate role-playing activities, literary escape rooms, and interactive quizzes to enhance student engagement through active participation. For instance, assigning students different character roles and conducting mock trials or debates reinforces comprehension while building speaking confidence. These activities transform traditional literary analysis into dynamic learning experiences.

Critical Analysis Development

Our findings indicate that female respondents showed more flexibility in identifying with both male and female characters, whereas male respondents overwhelmingly identified with male protagonists. This insight suggests the importance of fostering discussions about gender representation in literature and media, encouraging students to critically reflect on character identification and its implications for comprehension and engagement.

Age and language-level appropriate content selection is crucial, as not all literary works and their film adaptations resonate equally across different age groups, as

seen with the *Harry Potter* series. While younger students may be drawn to fantasy and adventure narratives, older students often engage more with historical fiction or contemporary dramas that explore complex themes and characters. To maximize engagement and learning, teachers should carefully select texts and multimedia that align not only with students' cognitive and emotional development but also with their language proficiency level, ensuring accessibility while still providing an appropriate challenge.

In an era of increasing digital media consumption, developing critical media literacy skills becomes essential. Encouraging analysis of how adaptations modify literary texts due to commercial constraints, audience expectations, or directorial vision fosters appreciation for both film and literature as distinct yet interconnected art forms. This critical awareness helps students become more discerning consumers of media while developing analytical skills.

Implementation Considerations

Educators can significantly enhance ESL instruction by adopting a flexible, student-centered approach when integrating literary texts and films. Rather than treating film as a lesser substitute for reading, leveraging it as a contextual and motivational tool can engage reluctant readers, improve comprehension, and foster a more inclusive learning environment. As Prágr and Řeřicha in their research on the role of visual media in ESL material observe, "the image replaces or becomes an obligatory adjunct to the text because the contemporary visual environment has altered our perception. We now tend to prefer reading images over reading text" (Prágr & Řeřicha, 2000, p.14).

These pedagogical strategies directly address the gaps in engagement and understanding identified in our research between film-only viewers and book readers. By deliberately structuring the integration of visual and textual narratives, educators can harness the motivational power of film while ensuring students develop the deeper analytical skills that come from literary engagement. This balanced approach creates a multimodal, interactive, and meaningful learning environment where students not only develop linguistic proficiency but also cultivate a lasting appreciation for storytelling across different media.

Conclusion

This study highlights the substantial differences in engagement, comprehension, and longterm interaction with literary narratives between students who solely watched film adaptations and those who also read the books. The data provide strong evidence that reading enhances thematic interpretation, character depth perception, and structural comprehension, reinforcing the argument that literature remains an indispensable

tool in ESL education. While films offer an accessible entry point and a means of visual reinforcement, they do not replace the critical and cognitive benefits provided by the written word.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the *Harry Potter* series represents a unique cultural and literary phenomenon that has captivated multiple generations. The intense emotional engagement it has inspired likely facilitated the data collection process but may also have influenced the nature of the findings. Other books and their film adaptations may produce different, possibly more contrasting results, particularly regarding gender-specific engagement and interpretative approaches. Despite this, the broader pedagogical implications remain applicable beyond this specific case, reinforcing the necessity of integrating literature and film in ESL instruction to foster deeper comprehension, engagement, and motivation.

Future research could explore the long-term effects of integrating film and literature in ESL instruction, particularly in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, studies could investigate the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and interactive storytelling, on student engagement and language acquisition. By continuing to explore these avenues, educators can further refine their pedagogical strategies to meet the evolving needs of ESL learners.

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