

Unveiling the Power of Storytelling to Enhance EFL Listening and Speaking: An Action Research Study

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Abstract

Storytelling is an important tool for teaching and learning a language. This research was undertaken with the purpose of improving the listening and speaking skills through the adoption of story-telling teaching strategy. It aimed to improve students' listening and speaking skills by incorporating storytelling into the teaching process. Many students have trouble understanding listening scripts in class, and struggle to articulate their thoughts in the speaking sessions. To address this issue, a classroom action research (CAR) study was conducted with 70 first-year Algerian EFL students, based on listening to stories, assessing comprehension, and then evoking interaction through discussing the plot, the characters, and asking for alternative endings. The results showed that listening to stories stimulates the critical and creative thinking of the students, develops their mental imagery, increases motivation, and boosts their engagement. The findings also revealed that the speaking skill improved significantly. The storytelling strategy creates intense emotional involvement among the students, new vocabulary is easily retained, the lexicon repertoire increases, and language is more accurately used. The study, therefore, calls for the implementation of the storytelling strategy in the EFL curriculum as an essential teaching and learning tool.

Keywords: Storytelling; Skills, EFL students; Listening; Speaking

Introduction

Language learners have a pressing need to connect with rich, authentic examples in the target language, and storytelling is seen as an integrated way to meet this need (Mourao, 2009). Short stories provide rich input and an immersive learning environment that can foster a lifelong love of storytelling and, when used in listening instruction, inspire a passion for learning the target language.

In Algeria, the "Listening & Speaking" module holds a significant position within the Department of English at Bouzareah Teacher Training College (ENSB/ Algiers). The course is allocated four and a half hours per week and is taught during the first and second academic years. Typically, the module is conducted in a designated room known as the "language laboratory," which is equipped with various audio technologies, such as tape recorders, gramophones, audio-cassette players, and headsets. In the event of technical difficulties, the teacher must provide their own personal laptop and

speakers. However, student feedback indicates that listening to audio scripts often fails to stimulate motivation and engagement, and as a consequence, undermines their capacity to comprehend and use the language. This may be due, in part, to the challenging nature of listening sessions, wherein students are required to understand spoken audio scripts, frequently delivered by native speakers, and provide accurate answers to comprehension questions. Such difficulties are compounded by the absence of body language, eye contact, and facial expressions, which might otherwise provide important contextual clues. Hence, authentic listening practices are of utmost importance. Considering these problems, the researcher is determined that taking action was necessary.

Research Questions

This action research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What impact does the story-based approach have on Algerian EFL students listening skill?
2. Does the storytelling approach help improve Algerian EFL students' speaking proficiency level?
3. Does the storytelling approach make students more motivated and engaged in learning English?

Theoretical Considerations

1-What is Storytelling?

Storytelling is the act of using words to convey a narrative for entertainment, and education within social contexts. Storytelling is often associated with our childhood. Most of us grew up listening to our mothers, fathers, and grandparents sharing lovely stories that served as our "bedtime books" before we fell asleep. But stories are not just for children—they have become a part of our daily lives. We hear them in the news, songs, religious texts, and even in casual conversations (De Gruyter, 2023). No doubt, stories are omnipresent in our lives; they are everywhere, and we think in narratives all the time, "we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative" (Hardy, 1978, p.13). In education, storytelling in all its forms—whether visual, written, told aloud, or listened to—is seen as a great way to boost EFL learning. Cameron (2001) advocates that stories can help learners at any age improve their language skills. In many countries where storytelling is used in classrooms, teachers rely on authentic language input to expose students to native speakers' accents. Instead of telling the stories themselves, they use stories told by native speakers, sometimes through recordings like tapes or podcasts.

Using storytelling to expose EFL learners to English provides chances for growth in educational, intellectual, cultural, and linguistic areas (Ompusunggu, 2018). Storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful tool for language learning. It engages students' imaginations while helping them develop key skills like listening and speaking. As Hsu, Tsu-Chia Julia (2015:1) points out, "storytelling has been promoted as an effective way to teach the English language to non-native speakers." By involving learners in stories, teachers are helping them practice new vocabulary, grammar, and conversational skills in a way that feels meaningful and enjoyable.

2-Listening

Listening is generally defined as the ability to comprehend the speech of native speakers at normal speed (Chastain,1971). Thereby, EFL learners are required to understand the aural input they hear in the listening session. It is, indeed, an interactive process through which students are invited to listen to spoken language (stories), decode it, get involved and react to it (Rost, 2002).

There are three phases in story-telling: Before storytelling, while storytelling and post storytelling (Wright, A. 1995). And because the overwhelming majority of English teachers are non-natives, the storytelling is meant to be listened to through an audio recording and narrated by a native speaker.

a- Before storytelling: The teacher chooses a story that triggers the interest of the students. The story has to be appropriate to their language level of proficiency with a limited number of characters, a clear plot, vocabulary containing new words and useful idioms whenever possible. The teacher gives them the title of the story to trigger their imagination. The 'before storytelling' phase is meant to supply background information so as to motivate students and increase their awareness of the topic which leads to better grasping the content of the story. During this phase the teacher debates with his students the meaning of the story's title, brainstorms information related to the story or its author, and discusses the geographical or historical background (Pardede, 2021).

b- While storytelling: In this phase, understanding and comprehension are given priority. Students listen to the story, get to know characters, understand the different events and digest the plot. The while storytelling engages listeners to infer and guess the meaning of new words using contextual clues.

c- Post storytelling: In this phase, speaking skills are emphasized and practised. The students understanding is tested through different activities ranging from true or false questions, comprehension questions and open discussions. Students are also invited to recap the story and provide a different end. In this stage, students are asked " to summarize, relate the story with their life, respond to the story orally or in

written form, discuss the theme and characters, identify, and analyze the grammatical structures....and so on” (Pardede, 2022, p. 168)

It is to be noted that in order to enhance critical thinking, EFL students are invited to understand the hidden meaning, discuss various assumptions and implications of the story, and debate alternative perspectives (speakers and listeners’ perspectives).

3-Speaking

Speaking is the act of uttering words and the ability to make ourselves understood by expressing thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and conveying messages within a social context. EFL students need to develop their speaking skill in order to be able to interact with others, and communicate effectively. Being able to speak is the very known way to measure the knowing of a language (Azkiyyah et al, 2019). According to Harmer(2007), storytelling is an effective method for teaching speaking skills. It enables students to briefly summarize a story they have heard from others or through media or even create their own stories to share with classmates. This is why, to encourage students to speak up and express their opinions verbally, the instructor must establish an engaging and entertaining environment (Baidaoui, 2016). This approach fosters the exchange of ideas and experiences, using storytelling as a powerful tool for sharing and interpreting experiences. Similarly, King (2001) views stories as a powerful engine and a motivating source for helping learners build and practise language skills. Because storytelling is regarded as an effective method for teaching and leaning a foreign language, many researchers have undertaken studies to unveil the magic and power of story telling in EFL classrooms (Zuhriyah, 2017; Firdaus & Amaniarsih, 2018).

4-Previous Studies on Storytelling

In 2013, Akhyak and Indramawan conducted a study in Indonesia entitled *“Improving students’ English competence through storytelling”*. The participants were exposed to a rich content of the story *“the fabla”*. The study reveals that implementing the storytelling technique enhanced fluency, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary of the students. On the same line, there is also a study entitled *“The use of storytelling methods to develop English language skills”* undertaken by (Samantaray, 2014), unveiling that storytelling techniques have a positive impact on EFL learning. These finding go in line with Fikriah (2016) in a study entitled *“Using storytelling techniques to improve English language skills of elementary school students”* which stressed the effectiveness of storytelling technique in improving learners’ language skills.

Furthermore, Kalantari and Hashemian (2015) conducted a study entitled *“The approach of storytelling to teach English to young Iranian EFL students”* which revealed the importance of storytelling in enriching EFL vocabulary. In the same year, Hsu, Tsu-Chia in her study entitled *“Telling tales: Using storytelling to teach kindergarten*

EFL students in Taiwan” revealed that learners greatly enjoyed storytelling time. This latter motivates them and makes learning more enjoyable and teaching more effective. Similarly, Zuhriyah (2017) undertook a study entitled “*Storytelling to Improve Students’ Speaking Skill*”. The findings revealed that adapting the storytelling approach contributed to a great extent in improving the speaking skill of the participants through boosting their comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

5-Methodology

This study follows a classroom action research (CAR) approach which follows the usual steps of action research: defining the problem, proposing the action plan, implementing the plan, and finally, monitoring and evaluating the process. The problem under study was that most first-year Algerian EFL students had difficulties in comprehending listening texts and coming up with their own responses during the speaking sessions. The plan of action was to tackle these challenges by incorporating storytelling into the teaching process through a structured plan which entailed three major phases: Pre-storytelling, During storytelling, and After storytelling activities. The action plan took place during the first term of the 2024-2025 academic year.

a-Participants of the Study

Participants in the present study were seventy first-year university students at Teacher Training College (ENSB/ Algiers)). The study is intended to help improve EFL students’ listening and speaking proficiency level.

b- Materials and Instruments

The materials were mainly prepared by the teacher: a personal laptop and speakers. It was impossible to use the language lab, which was already equipped with appropriate materials, due to technical deficiencies. The stories were taken from recognized audio books as well as from websites that focus on pedagogy to facilitate comprehension and speaking activities while ensuring that the vocabulary was appropriate to the learners’ level of proficiency. The progress was determined through classroom observation, listening comprehension assessments.

c-Procedure

The storytelling procedure was divided into three parts: *Pre-listening*, *While-listening* and *Post-listening*. The pre-listening activities started with questions to activate students’ background knowledge of the topic, prompt students to share their own experiences that are related to the story’s themes, and define any words that are related to the content of the story.. Following Brewster, Ellis, and Girard’s (2004) recommendations, the story was introduced by presenting characters, context, vocabulary, actions, and places.

During the while-listening phase, students focused on understanding the plot, characters, and overall message of the story. They were encouraged to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words through context clues and to identify key events or themes as the story unfolded. In the post-listening phase, students engaged in activities that stimulated creative thinking and vocabulary use, such as discussing or reconstructing the story's ending or imagining alternative conclusions.

The storytelling session was immediately followed by a speaking activity, further extending the post-listening phase. Students were asked to imagine an alternative ending to the story or to summarize it in their own words. These activities aimed to deepen their information processing and activate metacognitive strategies. Over the term, noticeable improvements were observed in students' pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and structural accuracy. The researcher made it a point to praise each student so they would feel their efforts were valued, and continued to encourage them after every stage of the learning process.

6-The Findings

The findings of this study provide answers to the three research questions. Based on classroom observations, listening comprehension activities, and interactive discussions, it was clear that stories are very motivating and capture students' attention better than listening to real-life conversations. The use of comprehension tasks and interactive discussions also showed how engaging storytelling can encourage active participation and keep students interested. The results also highlight how a structured approach, including pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening phases, improves students' listening and speaking skills.

In response to Research Question 1, the findings show that the storytelling approach positively affects EFL students' listening skills. During the pre-listening phase, 93% of students showed curiosity and enthusiasm as they got ready for the story. By activating their prior knowledge and exploring relevant vocabulary, students became interested and eager to engage with the material. Following the suggestions of Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2004), introducing the characters, context, and setting helped students visualize and mentally connect with the story. This structured approach kept students focused and prepared them to fully engage with the narrative.

At the while-listening stage, students gave their full attention to the story and became deeply involved with the characters, events, and overall narrative. They exhibited enthusiasm for learning English by closely following the story, making mental images of the plot, and capturing phrases and idioms. Observations revealed that EFL learners were highly motivated to listen to stories, and the process enriched their lexical repertoire due to their focus on meaning-based input (Nation, 2001-2002). This phase

highlighted the importance of storytelling as a tool for engaging students in active and attentive listening.

The post-listening phase provided opportunities for students to reflect on and interact with the story. Activities such as discussing or reconstructing the story's ending and imagining alternative conclusions stimulated creative thinking and encouraged the use of new vocabulary. These tasks allowed students to process the information deeply and use metacognitive strategies to improve comprehension and retention.

In response to Research Question 2, the findings reveal that the storytelling approach helps improve Algerian EFL students' speaking proficiency. Transitioning from listening to speaking, a noticeable improvement was observed. Students who were initially anxious and regularly stressed when invited to speak began to show signs of relief and appeared less stressed during speaking activities. They became deeply engaged in discussing the events, plot, and characters, which created a comfortable and supportive atmosphere in the session.

One student approached the teacher and shared, *"I love the Listening & Speaking session."* Another admitted, *"I used to hate this module. Now, I must admit that I eagerly look forward to the session each week to listen to interesting new stories and discuss the characters and the plot with my peers."* A third student stated, *"The most interesting part is when we are asked to create another ending to the story, I love creating a different ending."*

In response to Research Question 3, the findings reveal that the storytelling approach makes students more motivated and engaged in learning English. Classroom observations and students' comments highlight how the use of stories captured their attention and fostered a high level of participation. The structured storytelling activities created a positive learning environment where students were excited to learn. They actively participated in discussions, looked forward to the sessions, and showed an increased interest in English learning.

These findings reveal the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing both listening and speaking skills, fostering a supportive learning environment, and increasing students' confidence and motivation to engage with the English language.

7-Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of storytelling on EFL students' language learning experience across affective, cognitive, socio-cultural, and linguistic dimensions. Storytelling proves to be more than just a teaching technique; it creates an engaging and supportive learning environment that fosters emotional involvement, cognitive development, cultural awareness, and language acquisition.

From an **affective perspective**, the results indicate that storytelling enhances students' emotional engagement, making the learning process enjoyable and reducing anxiety. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes that a low-stress environment facilitates language acquisition. Similar to the findings of Kalantari and Hashemia (2016), the students in this study displayed increased motivation and confidence when listening to stories, as narratives provide a familiar and immersive context where they feel safe to participate.

On a cognitive level, storytelling enhances both memory retention and critical thinking skills. According to the findings, the presentation of various stories has helped the students to learn vocabulary effortlessly. This corroborates Kalantari and Hashemia's (2016) assumption that storytelling allows the learners linguistic input in depth, making the language more accessible. The results also confirm Murao (2009), as the stories awaken emotional imagination which, in turn, enhances the development of creativity and metaphorical understanding. Apart from that, listening to stories and and engaging in the art of creating alternative endings foster some important cognitive strategies such as predicting, drawing on inference, and hypothesizing—all those relevant to developing higher-order thinking in language learning.

From a **socio-cultural perspective**, storytelling can be used to expose students to the cultural and social aspects of the target language. As students involve themselves in a narrative, they gain insights into cultural norms, traditions, and real-life communication styles. This immersion in authentic language use aligns with the idea that language learning is inseparable from cultural understanding. The study's findings echo previous research suggesting that stories help bridge the gap between language and culture by making students more aware of the social context in which words and expressions are used. Storytelling encourages intercultural sensitivity by offering a different view on the world from that with which students are more familiar; it therefore enhances communicative competence.

Finally, **on a linguistic level**, the study confirms that storytelling provides a rich and natural context for language exposure. The findings support Rokhayani's (2010) argument that stories act as a bridge between language study and real-world language use. Listening to stories helps students internalize grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions, and the rhythm of spoken English in an implicit manner. This is in line with Chang's (2009) findings, which emphasize how storytelling facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary, idioms, and pronunciation patterns. Furthermore, by focusing on meaning rather than isolated linguistic components, storytelling promotes intuitive language learning, ultimately enhancing students' listening and speaking skills.

In sum, the discussion of these findings shows the multifaceted benefits of storytelling in EFL learning. By simultaneously addressing affective, cognitive, socio-cultural, and linguistic dimensions, storytelling emerges as an effective and holistic approach that enriches students' engagement, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and language proficiency. These results reinforce the idea that incorporating narratives into language instruction can transform the learning experience, making it more meaningful, interactive, and effective.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Listening and speaking are fundamental skills in learning English (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). This study shows that storytelling deeply engages learners cognitively, emotionally, and linguistically. To make the most of it, teachers should start with simple stories and gradually move to more complex ones while also exposing students to different accents and natural speech. As Jianing (2007) states, storytelling is learners' preferred learning strategy and a rich linguistic resource. Stories do more than teach language; they help learners express themselves and make learning enjoyable and meaningful.

Teachers should introduce stories step by step, from easy to more difficult, as students improve their English skills. They should also help learners get used to different accents and natural, fast speech. I agree with Jianing (2007), who sees storytelling as an effective teaching and learning method and a great language tool. As Wright (1995, cited in Miskiewicz, 2004) explains, stories are as important to our minds as food is to our bodies. Whether watching TV, going to a movie or play, reading, or sharing stories with friends, stories help us understand life and connect with the world around us.

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