

The Effects of Using Storytelling Activities on Fifth- Grade Efl Learners' Speaking Skills in Rural Vietnam

Thi Van Thuy Tran¹ and Nguyen Thi Diu²

¹PhD, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Academy of Journalism and Communication, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Vietnam.

²Graduate Student, School of Languages & Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry, Vietnam.

Abstract: Speaking skills play an important role in learning English. In reality, the difficulties in teaching English in rural areas still persist. Many primary school students in rural areas lack confidence when practicing speaking. In teaching English to elementary school students, the application of innovative and engaging teaching techniques brings many benefits to them. One of the effective methods to enhance children's English speaking skills is to use stories in the teaching process. This study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling activities in improving speaking skills (including fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation) and learning attitudes of primary school students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam. The study was conducted on 30 fifth-grade students at a rural elementary school through an action research design over a period of 4 weeks. The results show that students achieved significant improvement in speaking skills and had very positive and enthusiastic attitudes toward lessons based on storytelling methods, thereby affirming the effectiveness of this teaching method and technique for elementary school students, especially in rural areas of Vietnam in particular and the country in general.

Keywords: Benefits, activities, story-telling, pictures, vocabulary, grammar.

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, English is taught as a foreign language, as people only learn this language in school and do not use it in daily life, so it is truly a foreign language for Vietnamese students. However, English is still taught in classrooms across the country. According to the national curriculum, the Vietnamese government mandates that elementary school students will be required to learn English starting from the 3rd grade. Although it is not used frequently as the primary language of communication in daily life, it still holds a special position as a foreign language taught in schools. English is still used in classrooms in Vietnam, demonstrating its importance and the increasing global demand for English proficiency in general. Among the non-English speaking countries in the world, Vietnam has developed strongly as a market for teaching English. Moreover, along with the changes of the times and societal needs, the demand for learning English has increased alongside the global popularity of English, which proves that English is currently widely used around the world (Gunantar, 2016). The current education system in Vietnam is also developing and changing. Prihantoro (2014) argues that, in the face of today's rapid societal progress, the education sector is facing significant obstacles, especially in the effort to train a future generation capable of thriving in the global era.

Speaking is one of the most important skills that need to be developed and enhanced to help

learners communicate effectively (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). López (2011) argues that speaking strategies are communication strategies, conversational skills, or oral communication strategies; speaking strategies are the tools that students use to solve any communication problems when speaking in English (Prihantoro, 2014). The studies of Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990), among others, have provided classifications of speaking strategies. Among them, the most popular classification of speaking strategies is by the author Oxford (1990). According to this author, English speaking strategies are classified into six groups, including: (1) memory strategies: strategies that help learners store and retrieve new information, (2) cognitive strategies: strategies that allow learners to understand and create new language using various means, (3) compensatory strategies: strategies that support learners in bridging knowledge gaps and avoiding communication gaps in speaking activities. (4) emotional strategies: strategies that help develop self-confidence, (5) metacognitive strategies: strategies that help learners adjust their own cognitive abilities while focusing, planning, and evaluating their progress as they prepare communication skills, (6) strategies related to social factors: strategies that enhance interaction and greater empathy.

English proficiency, especially speaking skills, plays an extremely important role in primary

education in Vietnam today. However, the teaching of speaking skills at many rural primary schools still faces many limitations. The reasons include large class sizes, a lack of real interactive environments, and traditional teaching methods that still lean toward explaining grammar and vocabulary to serve written exams. Another reality is the disparity in learning conditions and the attention and financial investment from parents in the foreign language education of urban and rural students, which has certain gaps. As a result, fifth-grade students in rural Vietnam often feel anxious, struggle with vocabulary organization, and lack confidence when they have to present a simple story or an introduction in English on their own.

The storytelling method is considered an effective, cost-efficient teaching strategy that aligns with the psychological development of elementary school students. This method provides language input linked to natural contexts, while also encouraging students to actively produce communicative language. Although previous studies have shown many benefits of storytelling, empirical evidence of its comprehensive impact on the fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary of students in public elementary schools in rural Vietnam remains quite limited. Therefore, this study was conducted based on a survey, evaluation, and experimentation with 30 fifth-grade students from a class at a public elementary school in rural Vietnam to assess the effectiveness of storytelling activities in enhancing English speaking skills and improving the learning attitudes of fifth-grade students in a rural context.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Teaching Speaking Skills and The Benefits of Using Stories in Teaching English to Elementary School Students

According to Cameron (2001) and Ur (1996), primary school students learn foreign languages more effectively when supported by visual images, repetition, and emotionally connected lesson content, rather than abstract grammar rules. Speaking activities at this stage should prioritize communication and fluency over strict grammar correction to build the children's confidence.

Stories help children approach the English language naturally and easily create interest, thereby enhancing their language skills. Listening to and reading stories helps children develop vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure in English naturally within the context of the story. Listening to stories through books assists children

develop their listening and comprehension skills in English. Through listening to and understanding stories, children have the opportunity to naturally acquire the language and improve their listening comprehension skills. In addition, through stories, children's creativity is easily encouraged, as storybooks often come with images and engaging content, thereby helping to spark children's imagination and creativity. Learning through stories also encourages children to think creatively and develop their imaginative writing skills. Storybooks often contain cultural and humanistic values, helping children understand and empathize with the situations and characters in the story. Hence, children develop a sense of culture and ethics, while also fostering a connection with community values.

Storytelling Methods and Some Teaching Techniques through Storybooks

Storytelling is defined as the process of conveying knowledge, experiences, and emotions through the structure of a narrative (Ohler, 2013). In the framework of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, storytelling is an ideal environment that helps students encounter sentence structures and vocabulary naturally in context (Isbell, *et al.*, 2004). It helps reduce cognitive load and psychological anxiety, allowing young students to naturally imitate pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm, thereby enhancing their fluency and expressive skills. To teach English speaking to elementary school students through storytelling under the approach of CLT, teachers need to pay attention to some teaching techniques as follows:

First and foremost, it is necessary to choose an appropriate story. These are stories with concise content, easy to understand for elementary school students, and with vivid, engaging images for children. For elementary school students, especially in the lower grades, stories need to focus more on images than on content and words. It must be ensured that the story has vocabulary and grammar appropriate to the lesson and the child's level of English. When teaching, to help students infer the content and stimulate their imagination, teachers need to ask students to look at the pictures in the story and pose questions for them to think about and answer.

Secondly, during the story reading phase, teachers need to use appropriate tone and expression to stimulate the students' interest. Pause at important words and phrases to explain their meanings and

help the children understand better. After reading the story, the teacher needs to create opportunities for students to discuss the content, characters, and events in the story. Ask the children to express their opinions, request them to retell the story in English, or ask questions that require them to use the vocabulary and grammar they have learned. Additionally, teachers can organize games for children to create fun activities such as role-playing characters from the story, performing, or playing games based on the story. This will help children apply and remember vocabulary and grammar in real-life contexts. Teachers can also create creative activities such as asking children to draw pictures about the story, rewrite the story by changing the characters or the ending, or even continue the story with a new one. These activities encourage children to use the English language creatively.

Thirdly, after reading, teachers can use textbooks, songs, or videos related to the story to help students expand their vocabulary and grammar. Also, it is of necessity to plan for regular reading by creating a consistent reading schedule and encouraging participation. This helps students be continuously exposed to English and improve their language skills.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Subject

This study applies an Action Research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research participants included 30 fifth-grade students from a class at a public elementary school in rural Vietnam. The purposive sampling method was used to select students with equivalent English proficiency. The pedagogical intervention process takes place over 4 weeks. The speaking lessons are designed according to the step-by-step adaptation process from Miller (1996), including: (1) Story preparation; (2) Introduce vocabulary/characters through pictures;

(3) Discuss and write a small group script; (4) Group practice; (5) Performance (students role-play or retell the story in front of the class); (6) Evaluation and Feedback.

Data Collection and Analysis Tools

The main tool referenced for data collection is the questionnaire on English speaking strategies by the author Sri (2013). This questionnaire is adapted from the SILL version 7.0 on strategies for learning to speak English for learners of English as a foreign language and/or as a second language by Oxford (1990). The questionnaire includes questions belonging to six groups of speaking strategies: Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensatory strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies, and Social strategies. However, since the research subjects are elementary school students, the questionnaire has been flexibly adapted to suit their cognitive age. The authors used pre- and post-experimental tests. Students perform individual speaking tasks, and scores are graded based on three criteria: Fluency, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary.

The classroom observation sheet is used by the teacher to record the level of interaction and enthusiasm of the students during the lesson.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of 6 students after the experimental period to gain deeper insights into their attitudes.

The Participants

The research was conducted experimentally at a public elementary school in the rural area of Vietnam. The class chosen to evaluate the research results is class 5A with a total of 30 students. They have been required to learn English at school since the 3rd grade. Therefore, you have become familiar with various methods of learning and practicing spoken English. The distribution of the 30 fifth-grade students participating in this action research is detailed in Table 3.1

Table 3.1: Distribution of study participants

Group	Class	Number of students (N)	Percentage (%)
Experimental class	5A	30	100
Total number		30	100

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Impact of Storytelling Activities on Students' Speaking Outcomes

The progress in students' speaking skills is evaluated by comparing the average scores of the pre-test and post-test according to each grading criterion.

Table 4.1: Comparison of speaking scores before and after the experiment (Maximum score: 10)

Scoring criteria	Average score Pre-test	Average score Post-test	The rate of increase in points (Gain)
Fluency	5.20	6.45	1.25
Pronunciation	5.50	6.30	0.80
Vocabulary	5.10	6.25	1.15
Total speaking score	5.27	6.33	1.06

As the results show the average scores increased across all assessed criteria. For fluency, the mean score increased from 5.20 in the pre-test to 6.45 in the post-test, representing a gain of 1.25 points. The average pronunciation score rose from 5.50 to 6.30, with a gain of 0.80 points. Similarly, the vocabulary score increased from 5.10 in the pre-test to 6.25 in the post-test, showing a gain of 1.15 points. Regarding the overall speaking performance, the total average speaking score increased from 5.27 before the experiment to 6.33 after the experiment, resulting in a gain of 1.06 points

All in all, the findings reveal that students made significant progress in all three component skills after 4 weeks of intervention. The highest level of progress belongs to Fluency (+1.25), followed by Vocabulary (+1.15). This quantitative data confirms that storytelling activities have effectively enhanced students' speaking abilities.

Students' Attitudes Toward Storytelling Activities

Students' perceptions of speaking lessons based on the storytelling method were surveyed through a questionnaire after the experimental period. The attitude toward learning activities of 30 students when using the questionnaire yielded the following results:

Table 4.2: Students' attitudes toward storytelling activities

Survey statements	Strongly opposed		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Quantity	(%)	Quantity	(%)	Quantity	(%)
1. Stories help me understand vocabulary more easily.	3	10	13	43	14	47
2. Retelling stories helps me remember sentence structures for longer.	4	13	15	50	11	37
3. Storytelling makes speaking lessons more interesting.	2	7	11	37	17	56
4. Storytelling activities help me become more confident when speaking.	3	10	12	40	15	50
5. I participate more actively when there is storytelling in the class.	3	10	9	30	18	60

For the statement that stories help students understand vocabulary more easily, 10% of the students strongly opposed, 43% agreed, and 47% strongly agreed. Regarding the statement that retelling stories helps students remember sentence structures for longer, 13% of the students strongly opposed, 50% agreed, and 37% strongly agreed. With respect to the statement that storytelling makes speaking lessons more interesting, 7% of the students strongly opposed, 37% agreed, and 56% strongly agreed. For the statement that storytelling activities help students become more confident when speaking, 10% of the students strongly opposed, 40% agreed, and 50% strongly agreed. Concerning the statement students participate more actively when storytelling is

included in the class, 10% of the students strongly opposed, 30% agreed, and 60% strongly agreed.

It is crystal clear that most students chose "Agree" or "Strongly agree" for all statements, demonstrating a very positive attitude toward vocabulary acquisition, structure memorization, and lesson participation with storytelling activities being employed in speaking sessions.

Classroom Observation Results

Classroom observation sessions were conducted throughout the experimental teaching process, with scores based on a scale from 0 to 2 (0 = not observed, 1 = partially observed, 2 = clearly observed).

Table 4.3: Classroom observation results during storytelling lessons

No.	Content of observation	Average score
1	Students actively participate in storytelling activities.	2.00
2	Students show enthusiasm and eagerness in class.	1.83
3	Students collaborate effectively with their classmates when working in groups.	1.67
4	Students understand the steps involved in the storytelling activity.	1.83
5	Students can apply the target vocabulary and sentence structures.	1.67
6	The classroom atmosphere is lively and supportive for learning.	2.00

The results of classroom observations during storytelling lessons presented the average score for students' active participation in storytelling activities was 2.00. Students' enthusiasm and eagerness in class received an average score of 1.83.

The observation item regarding students' collaboration with their classmates during group work had an average score of 1.67. Students' understanding of the steps involved in the storytelling activity obtained an average score of 1.83. The ability to apply the target vocabulary and sentence structures received an average score of 1.67. Finally, the classroom atmosphere being lively and supportive for learning recorded an average score of 2.00.

Observation data (Table 4.3) confirmed high levels of student engagement and a very positive classroom atmosphere. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews also agrees with this. One student shared: *"Before, I was very afraid of speaking English because I was afraid of making mistakes. But now that I can see visual pictures and play the characters in the story, I find speaking English very fun and easy to remember vocabulary."*

DISCUSSION

Research results demonstrate that storytelling activities have a positive impact on English speaking skills and student engagement in the context of primary EFL. This improvement is explained by the interactive and contextual nature of the storytelling method, which helps provide meaningful input and reduce cognitive load for children.

The positive attitude of students can be explained through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes that learners will be more motivated when their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are supported. Storytelling acts as a "pedagogical scaffold" that helps lower psychological barriers (anxiety, fear), while also providing students with repeated

exposure to the language to naturally acquire pronunciation and vocabulary. However, from practical implementation, effective time management and classroom management by teachers remain key factors to ensure that games/activities align with the lesson objectives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of storytelling activities in supporting the English speaking skills of fifth-grade students at a rural primary school in Vietnam. The results indicate that the systematic application of storytelling significantly improves students' speaking outcomes, particularly in terms of fluency and vocabulary. Survey and observation results also show that students have a very positive attitude, enhancing their confidence and proactivity. Teaching English through stories is a useful method to help elementary school children become interested and naturally absorb the language, especially elementary school students. Through the use of storytelling techniques, students will have the opportunity to develop their English language skills in a natural and enjoyable way. At the same time, it also helps students understand the culture and values of the stories during the learning process. However, teachers also need to choose stories with content, vocabulary, and grammar appropriate to the students' level. They should opt for short, engaging stories with relatable content and repetitive language structures. And, it is necessary to enhance the use of visual materials such as pictures, puppets, flashcards, and body language to maximize comprehension and engage students into learning process while boosting their speaking skills.

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