

# Digital storytelling in EFL classrooms: The effect on the oral performance

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**Abstract:** The aim of this mixed methods study is to investigate the effect of two ways of storytelling on speaking skills of Iranian EFL learners. The traditional way of storytelling which is called storytelling aloud is performed by a teacher or a narrator in an educational setting. Another way of storytelling named digital storytelling is done using the internet and websites. This mixed method study measured the differences between effect of digital storytelling and storytelling aloud on speaking skill of Iranian EFL learners using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were collected from 42 students who were aged 19 to 25 years old at Payam Noor University in Gorgan, Iran. In this study a TOEFL speaking test was administered to students in two classes as the pre-test. Next, one of the classes as experimental group consisting of 21 participants was exposed to treatment in which they participated in a digital storytelling course for 12 sessions. The other class as the control group had the traditional storytelling instruction. At the end of the course, the same TOEFL speaking test was administered to both groups. Alongside the speaking test, the experimental group was given a questionnaire about the effectiveness of digital storytelling course on their motivation to improve their speaking ability. The data analyzed by using SPSS software proved the efficiency of the digital storytelling on the oral performance of EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Digital Storytelling, Storytelling Aloud, Oral Performance, EFL Learners

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## 1. Introduction

There are many things that can be used to extend words and create a more powerful impact on speaking. For example, stories can be used in a speech to invoke emotions and reaction in the audience. A story is a description of events, people and places that a writer or speaker recounts in order to entertain people. Adventures, detective and love stories can also incorporate shared heritage, institutions and values providing the cultural literacy which is necessary for improving reading comprehension (Rains, 2009).

Stories are presented most often and children receive stories in a variety of ways at various levels of education. Further, storytelling aloud is an important part of the schools' curriculum in some countries. However, storytelling aloud has not been widely examined in EFL regions in the world. The present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of teacher's storytelling aloud on students' speaking skills. Thus, it is hoped that using storytelling aloud in the classroom will help students

improve their speaking abilities. On the other hand, it may affect other abilities of learners.

An engaging method of the implementation of computer-aided instruction is the digital media. Computers and digital media have created dynamic opportunities for teaching and learning. Multimedia applications offer children more control of the learning experience (Yildirim et al., 2001).

Storytelling is a creative art which entertains people over centuries and across cultures and its instructional potential continues to serve teachers (Fisher, 1984). As stated by Marsh (1986), the art of telling stories supplies a changeable tool for teaching a language. It makes students' minds more creative and provides the environment for language learning which is an experience and can be used with groups as well as individuals. The teachers and students can be the other sources for new activities. Storytelling may start with reading a story aloud to students using natural voice.

Moreover, Marsh (1986) indicates that the idea of storytelling prepares a plan of information and personalities for the listeners and speakers when they are engaged in discussing a story. So they learn the aim of every text getting new information and insights. Moreover,

storytelling affects the listener by expanding interest in new areas. Storytelling is regarded as an effective and alternative tool. Its cross-cultural understanding role and also family and community values assist creative thinking and any other areas of language skills. Teachers using their own creativity and drawing librarians and media specialists for curriculum resources can develop story tools in English.

Marsh (1986) also maintains that storytelling supplies imaginative skills to be careful listeners, and to develop new interests for new areas of learning a language. It can complete and increase the available world plans by language programs provided by teachers. These findings indicate that storytelling is a valid method for stimulating students' imagination ultimately leading to a higher cognitive level in students' responses.

Reineher (1987) discusses ways of using mythic literature to teach students about themselves and to help them tell their own stories. It can give students more of a sense of story and much awareness that can help them in both speaking and reading. In reading, for example, a sense of story can help students to predict and know what to expect and to read with more awareness of cause and effect, sequence and other story factors related to comprehension (Kempton & Edwards, 1986).

Tway (1985) states that in speaking, students learn to apply structures while telling their own stories and give shape to their experiences. He also mentions that storytelling is a creative art form that has been entertaining and informative across nations and cultures. Storytelling, or oral literature, has many of its roots in the attempt to explain life or the mysteries of the world and the universe. Using storytelling is a useful way of improving oral language or speaking, reading comprehension, and writing in EFL classrooms. Researchers surveyed students and found a high correlation between good readers and good speakers, as well as poor readers and poor speakers (Moore, 1995).

Storytelling is regarded as a comprehensive device because speakers use their background and linguistic knowledge to create a message that will be meaningful to the intended audience in all cases. Speakers activate relevant schemata from specific context to convey meaning for a definite purpose with an intended audience in mind.

Storytelling helps speakers (1) to be able to comprehend meaning that is conveyed at a level beyond that of sentence, (2) to have a purpose, which is to bridge some information gap, (3) to have the choice of what to say and how to say it, (4) to have an objective in mind while talking and (5) to attend to many factors at the same time.

The researchers believe that storytelling helps students improve their speaking skills, their communication skills, their language knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciations, accent, etc. On the other side, students are mostly unable to speak efficiently and comprehend what they read and hear. They also notice that most students got low grades in the reading exams. Thus, they also suggest a technique to develop students' reading comprehension

ability. They believe that storytelling aloud by the teacher may have a significant role in enhancing students' reading comprehension skills.

It is common for teachers to read stories to young elementary school students in class. Storybook reading is widely recommended in educational literature (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002). In addition to its entertainment value, some proponents of storytelling believe that storytelling may have considerable potential as an educational tool. The role of storytelling in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of many teachers and scholars. However, its validity as an equal complement to language learning has often been ignored (Hyland, 1990). The reason for this reputation may be that much of the evidence that indicates storytelling to be beneficial for children is either qualitative or anecdotal (Gallets, 2005).

This study attempts to determine whether or not elementary stage students' speaking ability will improve when they are told stories in the classroom. It is hoped that the study will help researchers get involved in the educational process and provide insights into storytelling to improve language skills and to be a useful instrument among available tools in educational settings over time. It may also encourage further research, which in turn, may lead to the enrichment of the field of storytelling in general and language teaching and learning in particular. As a result, this study and other studies which are concerned with storytelling will be welcome in schools not only as entertainers but also as a partner in the educational process.

### **1.1. Background**

Recently many research papers were conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of the storytelling in school. Several scholars (Alna, 1999; Ellis, 1997; Isbell et al., 2004; Kim, 1999) believe that children can benefit from listening to storytelling. Storytelling today is increasingly recognized as having important theoretical and practical implications.

One of the reasons for using the technique of storytelling in the classroom is that it allows the modeling of language patterns. Learners can imitate the structure and the sounds they hear. Hillman (1975) explains that while the teacher is reading, he/she can infuse the syntactic order of the written language with pitch, juncture, stress and other paralinguistic uses that contribute to the interpretation of the passage. Imitation of the sounds has a direct bearing on the increased vocabulary that is a result of hearing stories and poem. He also states that hearing words in contexts adds to the number of meanings in a learners' receptive vocabulary and gives the listener alternative ways to express him/ herself.

Clarke and Adam (2011) worked on the perspectives and reflections of digital storytelling in Australia. They found that digital storytelling has been developing over the last decade as a communication, teaching, research and personal reflection tool. There is a growing volume of literature on its application emerging from North America, the UK, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. In Australia, as in other places, there is a Digital Storytelling Network

whose members include primary and high school teachers, as well as teachers working within the post-secondary Adult and Vocational Education and Training sector.

McCormick (1977) indicates that 4th- through 6th-graders have demonstrated that who are read aloud to on a regular basis over a period of several months show significant gains in reading comprehension, decoding skills, and vocabulary. It was also found that all children benefited significantly compared with the control groups, who were read to only occasionally or not at all.

Williamson (1988) emphasizes that teachers should read to their students. As the teachers read to their students, the students get a better feel for the language and its structure. Moreover, Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) note that performing storytelling to elementary stage students does have a positive impact on their performance. It builds interest in the reading process, stimulates discussion, and enhances self-confidence in the participants. It also makes even poor readers literate and gives them the chance to show their abilities.

Furthermore, Zaytoun (1988) states that in order to achieve a higher level of comprehension, the teacher should expose the students to real-life situations in which native speakers of English use language in a spontaneous, conversational and communicative way. He also adds the teachers should have their students listen, then read short stories about personal experiences, family, friend, or even tales about current events or controversial issues. In doing so, the teacher exposes the students to natural language with infinite variety of structures, new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions adding a lot of terms of meaningful cultural exchanges.

Elley (1991) has also found that exposing children to an extensive range of high-interest illustrated storybooks makes them learn the target language more quickly. She has found that when the children are engaged in meaningful texts without the constraint of structure and vocabulary, they are likely to learn the language incidentally and develop positive attitudes towards books and school.

Several studies have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. For example Beck and Mckeown (1999), Campbell (2001), McCarthy et al. (2001), Queini et al. (2008) studied the effect of storytelling on speaking.

According to a study conducted by Isbell et al. (2004), researchers studied the impact of storytelling and reading stories on the development of language and comprehension of children from the age of three to five. The finding of their study showed that storytellers tend to use more repetitions, sounds and gestures than a person merely reading a story.

Further, Mello (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies regarding the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. Her analyses included information from pre- and post-interviews with participants; she found that storytelling served to improve self-awareness, visual imagery, and cultural knowledge.

There was no study focusing on the investigation of differences between traditional storytelling and digital storytelling. The aim of the present study is to illustrate the different implications of two ways of storytelling for EFL learners' speaking ability.

## 1.2. Research Questions

1. Do students in the experimental group perform better in term of speaking ability in comparison with their peer in control group?

2. Do Iranian EFL learners perceive digital storytelling leading to improvement more than traditional storytelling?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

Thirty eight university students from two classes took part in the present study. All of the students who participated in this study were EFL learners majoring in Translation at Param Noor University in Translationa short period of time) in the academic year 2014 in Gorgan, Iran. Their native language was Persian ranged in age from 18 to 26 and they were at the intermediate level of English language proficiency as determined by the OPT (Oxford Placement Test).

### 2.2. Instrumentation

#### 2.2.1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

It is useful for measuring the learners' language proficiency. It was administered to the students exactly at the beginning of the study in order to have a homogeneous sample for the two groups.

#### 2.2.3. TOEFL Speaking Test

As pre-test and post-test, the TOEFL speaking test consisting of 20 items was modified and administered twice. The differences in mean value and variance for both of the tests were the answers to the first research question. The validity of the test was approved by three experts and its reliability was determined to be 0.84.

#### 2.2.4. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of six questions mostly asking students to mention the effect of digital storytelling on their speaking skill. It was given to the students after the final post-test was administered. The students in the experimental group were subjected to this questionnaire.

### 2.3. Storytelling Courses

The digital storytelling course was the treatment for the experimental group of the study. Each session the experimental group took part in a course in front of computers' screens in which they read a short story in each session. The teacher monitored the performance of students during their work on the stories. After the story was read by the students, the teacher asked them to tell what they

understood about the story. After that, they had to reproduce the story orally.

The storytelling aloud which was performed by the teacher in the classroom was the treatment for the control group of the study. Each session they took part in a 30-minute class in which they listened to a short story. The teacher read a story aloud and the students listened to their teacher. Next session, they had to retell the story orally.

In this experiment the website 'Storybird' was chosen in order to apply the treatment. As the evaluation was done by Chapelle (2001) among the websites of *Story Jumper*, *Tikatok*, and *Storybird*, the website *Storybird* was found to be the most appropriate one due to better learner and teacher fits.

#### 2.4. Procedure

At the beginning, two classes were randomly assigned as experimental and control groups. First, they were given the OPT. Then the participants in two groups were given a pre-test. Next the students in the two groups were subjected to the above-mentioned treatment. After the course ended in three months for duration of eight sessions, a post-test was administered to both groups in order to measure the improvement of students' speaking skills. Finally, in order to gather their ideas and feedback about digital storytelling, a questionnaire was given to the students in the experimental group. The main goal of the study was making the students motivated and interested in developing speaking skills through telling stories digitally and asking them to paraphrase and reproduce the concepts of the stories.

#### 2.5. Data Analysis

##### 2.5.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis was applied using the data obtained from the TOEFL speaking test. After the storytelling course, the SPSS software was employed to compare the mean and frequency of the pre-test and the post-test scores in order to check the progress of both experimental and control groups. Levene's test and the t-test were used to prove the efficiency of the treatment to the experimental group.

##### 2.5.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis was extracted from a questionnaire which was administered to both groups immediately after the course ended. The aim of the questionnaire was to collect the participants' reactions and motivation toward the digital storytelling course and the traditional storytelling method. Six questions were included in the questionnaire and the students were supposed to fill in one of the five possible answers on the Likert scale.

### 3. Results

In order to confirm that the participants assigned to control and experimental groups were not initially different

but homogeneous, an independent sample t-test was run. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of both Groups' Performances in Pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	sig	t
Experimental	21	5.38	2.39	0.893	0.136
Control	21	5.29	2.14		

Note: The full score is 40. \*  $p < .05$

As the results in the Table 1 indicate, t value is 0.136 and sig=0.893 which is greater than .05. It means that there was no significant difference between control and experimental groups. Therefore, it was concluded that control and experimental groups were homogeneous at the outset of the study.

Table 2. Comparison of both Groups' Performances in Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	sig	t
Experimental	21	14.86	2.57	0.046	2.061
Control	21	12.38	2.19		

Note: The full score is 40. \*  $p < .05$

An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the control and experimental groups in the post-test. As displayed in Table 2, the mean score for the control group is 12.38, with a standard deviation of 2.19. The mean score and the standard deviation for the experimental group are 14.86 and 2.57, respectively. The results show differences between the control and experimental groups' mean scores in the post-test.

Among the participants in the experimental group who were engaged in the questionnaire survey, 93.4% of the sample unanimously stated that the application of digital storytelling leads to development of their speaking performance. They mostly had the following comments:

- I like reading stories on the screen because it is interesting to me.
- Nothing has motivated me except digital storytelling to express my ideas during classes.
- When I take part in storytelling classes, I give my full attention to what others say.
- Digital storytelling classes make me prepare myself as much as possible before class.
- It was a great experience during my education.

Analyzing the results obtained from the experimental and the control groups with regard to the effect of digital storytelling on the oral performance, it can be deduced that the instruction of storytelling benefited the oral performance of the respondents.

### 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of two methods of telling stories on the oral performance of

EFL students. With respect to the first question of this study, “Do students in the experimental group perform better than ones in the control group with respect to speaking ability?” the findings indicate that the learners in the experimental group outperformed the ones in the control group; as a result, digital storytelling can improve students’ speaking skills much more than the traditional way of storytelling. With regard to the second research question, “Do Iranian EFL learners perceive digital storytelling leading to improvement more than traditional storytelling?”, the questionnaire survey presented an enormously strong answer to that. The results of questionnaire survey illustrated the effect of digital storytelling on students’ performance in speaking. Moreover, the students in the experimental group had more positive attitudes toward digital storytelling. Both of the qualitative and quantitative methods proved the effect of storytelling on Iranian EFL learners’ oral performance.

The finding of the present study is in compliance with the results of studies done by Keshta and Al-Rahman (2010), and Kowsary and Zolfagharkhani (2013). More specifically, the results extracted from this study enhance the findings of Clarke and Adam (2011) and Somdee and Suppasetsee (2012), showing that digital storytelling strategy might help the EFL learners improve their different language skills as well as helping them increase their motivation toward learning a language.

On the other hand, referring to a study conducted by Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) on the efficiency of teacher’s storytelling aloud in the reading comprehension of Saudi elementary stage students, the experimental group outperformed the control group. Thus, this study favors the results of Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) that the storytelling strategy helps students to improve their language skills, especially in relation to speaking skill which is directly related to the storytelling aloud because the students at first listen to the way the teacher speaks, then they practice with a great deal of motivation to develop their speaking skills.

The findings of this study also conform to the results of the studies conducted by Amer (1997). All these studies showed that using digital storytelling aloud in English language instruction has a positive effect that helps students improve their language skills. Finally, we reach the conclusion that storytelling allows students to become literate, motivates them to be active participants in the speaking process, allows more extended speech and improves speaking skill and communication, vocabulary, retelling and accent, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study was aimed to answer the questions related to the effect of digital storytelling on speaking. Applying a mixed method design is one of the advantages of this study in comparison with other studies which were done before. The results of this study showed that all 21

students in the experimental group considered the digital storytelling helpful stating that their reading and speaking improved a lot. Table 1 and table 2 above show the difference between the achievements of the two groups in this study. The experimental group obtained mean value of 5.38 in the pre-test and the control group got 5.29 in this test. After applying the treatment of the study, the experimental group reached at 14.86 for mean value while the control group obtained 12.38. This difference indicates that using digital storytelling in English language instruction has a positive effect on students’ achievement.

According to the results of this study, the strategy of applying digital storytelling not only enhances the speaking ability of learners but also has a considerable effect on students’ motivation toward language learning in general and speaking skills in particular. Digital storytelling and story making provide opportunities for sharing thoughts and ideas as a class, group or individually. It is a motivational tool which encourages learning, good communication skills and engagement in writing. Digital storytelling is also an ideal tool for supporting kids with special educational needs. It can also direct students to reach a deep comprehension in a short period of time. Simplicity of storytelling helps instructors not only implicitly present materials but also it helps students to understand more comprehensively.

As speaking ability is in touch with listening skill which both were subjects for this study, the future issues might consider the effect of digital storytelling on other skills of students. Also, studies can be done on the different ways of telling stories and their impact on students’ skills. Studies are required to be done on the effect of digital storytelling on the power of imagination and creativity of the students separately because students retell the stories after they listen to them. Retelling stories stirs their imagination and creativity.

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