Storytelling and Story Reading Impacts on Pre-intermediate English Language Learners' Oral Language Production and Comprehension

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Abstract

Storytelling impact on language learners' first language acquisition was extended to foreign language learning, and many researchers interested in the field tried to accomplish story reading and storytelling strategies in teaching oral language skills to foreign/second language learners. Although myriads of studies have examined the effect of storytelling on language skills, not many researchers have attempted to investigate the impact of story reading and telling approaches on pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral language production and comprehension. To address the gap, a quasi-experimental study was employed. Ninety Iranian EFL learners, from six intact classes (each consisting of 15), were divided to three sub-groups: Storytelling, story reading, and conventional groups. To one group, stories were told, one group only read the stories, and the third group received no stories. The data were collected through researcher-developed oral language production and comprehension tests. One-way-ANOVA and three independent samples-tests based on Bonferroni test were employed to analyze the data and locate the sources of the differences. Findings approved that storytelling outperformed story reading groups on both production and comprehension tests. Story reading group outperformed the conventional group. It can be concluded that telling and reading stories are effective techniques for improving EFL learners' oral language production and recognition. The findings can be used by EFL teachers in listening and speaking classes to deeply involve language learners in classroom activities.

Keywords: EFL learners, Oral language production, Oral language comprehension, Storytelling, Story reading

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has been defined as the art of telling stories via actions and words (Soleimani & Akbari, 2013) to engage and entertain an audience. Barzaq (2009, p. 9) defined storytelling as a "knowledge management technique, a way of distributing information, targeted to audiences and a sense of information". She added that stories offer "natural connection between events and concepts" and finally stated that "visual storytelling is a way of telling stories through images" (Barzaq, 2009, p. 9). More importantly, she believed that stories link people to the past, present and the future and build blocks of knowledge (Barzaq, 2009). As Dujmović (2006) believes, storytelling differs from story reading because it narrates an event or a tale from memory (Dujmović, 2006). As Khodabandeh (2018) argues, storytelling seems to be an effective and helpful strategy that can be used by second and foreign language learners to improve their language skills. Moreover, it has been claimed that storytelling can enhance language learners' communication skills (Mokhtar, Kamarulzaman, & Syed, 2011; Sanchez, 2014). Similarly, Wallace (2000) argues that storytelling task has actually become a common language which facilitates meaningful communication. Through storytelling, language learners can hear and understand each other's stories because they recognize themselves in the stories of others, no matter how varied our cultural backgrounds.

Sanchez (2014) proposes that storytelling can successfully help language learners learn a second or foreign language as they learn their mother language. Through storytelling, language learners can contextualize language components like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and suprasegmental features meaningfully (Amer, 2003). Besides, it increases language learner' visual memory and writing skills (Katsuhiko, 2002; Sarıca, & Usluel, 2016). Similarly, Miller and Pennycuff (2008) hold that language teachers can employ storytelling as an effective teaching technique to enhance students' abilities in learning domains. It is an appropriate instructional strategy for language development (Woodhouse, 2007). It can

also improve general knowledge of language learners (Alsumait & Al-Musawi, 2013) and increase language learners' speaking accuracy (Chalak, & Hajian, 2013).

Detailed analysis of the related studies shows that there are numerous studies on the use of storytelling in EFL classes (e.g., Essig, 2005; Kalantari & Hashemian, 2016; Mokhtar, Kamarulzaman, & Syed, 2011; Samantaray, 2014; Sanchez, 2014). In spite of that, the contribution of the storytelling story reading strategies on pre-intermediate language learners' oral language comprehension and production has not been investigated and documented, up to now. In this study, the impact of storytelling and story reading strategies on EFL learners' oral comprehension and production are addressed.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study was an attempt to investigate whether or not storytelling and story reading affect Iranian pre-intermediate language learners' oral language production and comprehension. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do storytelling and story reading affect pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production ability?
2. Do storytelling and story reading affect pre-intermediate EFL learners' EFL learners' oral comprehension?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The contribution of storytelling to the students' first language (L1) development and literacy was generalized to learning foreign and second language (L2), and a large number of researchers interested in the field attempted to use storytelling and story reading strategies in teaching oral language skills to foreign/second language learners. Therefore, to learn more about the contribution of storytelling to language learning, researchers

have paid great attention to storytelling technique. The number of published books and on teachers' use of storytelling in their classrooms has greatly increased as more teachers found this instructional approach more practical (Chang, 2000; Ellis & Brewster, 2002; Hemmati, Gholamrezapour & Hessamy, 2015; Khodabandeh, 2018; Lin, 2003; Marzuki, Prayogo & Wahyudi, 2016; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Roney, 2001; Yao, 2003).

For instance, Trousdale (1990) and Brice (2004) showed that storytelling positively contributes to learners' English-speaking performance. Similarly, Sepahvand's (2014) study confirmed that as storytelling attracts the students' focus on meaning rather form, is an important strategy to improve the students' oral speaking abilities. In the same vein, Marzuki, et al. (2016) suggested that storytelling as an interactive strategy positively contributes to the EFL learners' oral production and their classroom activities. Similarly, Hemmati, et al. (2015) showed that reading the stories aloud and teachers' storytelling activities can positively affect language learners' oral language comprehension. Storytelling can also develop language skills like grammar knowledge, reading and writing.

Soleimani and Akbari (2013) and Kalantari and Hashemian (2015) in two similar studies reported that storytelling strategy can significantly improve EFL learners' English vocabulary and enhances motivation for learning English language. Furthermore, through using storytelling strategy less motivated EFL/ESL learners are motivated to deeply engage in learning decoding and encoding language skills (Juraid & Ibrahim, 2016). More importantly, the findings reported by Martinez's (2007) and Kalantari and Hashemian's (2015) verified that EFL students' motivation and interest in learning second/foreign languages increase through the storytelling and reading strategies.

In another study, Miller and Pennycuff (2008) suggested that teachers need to use different instructional strategies to improve language learners' literacy. The use of storytelling in English language classes is one way to enhance literacy by improving language oral and written language

skills. As storytelling has an interrelated nature in writing and reading, it is known as a useful pedagogical strategy to be employed in EFL classrooms for increasing students' competence in all language areas. Similarly, Cortazzi and Jin (2007) investigated the language achievement of young learners of English language, who used story maps and keywords to tell stories, in L1 and L2. They found that language learners found storytelling very effective.

Martinez (2007) employed stories to promote the language learners' motivation for learning. The researcher reported that during the study, the students were motivated and participated in the exercises and fulfilled all assigned homework. It was also found that the participants liked to work through stories and their attitudes toward the instructional activities changed as the stories were told to them.

Similarly, Gonzalez (2010) undertook a study to delve into the effect of storytelling on language learners' motivation. While undertaking the study, the researcher asked the student teachers to plan the course, plan the lessons, create stories based on the children's interests and preferences, and collect and analyze data. It was found that while children were telling or listening to the stories, their motivation increased. It was also found that storytelling enhanced the language learners' involvement and participation and a variety of activities, learning new words, idioms, and expressions as well as comprehending stories.

Researchers have often used story retelling as an assessment device in studies to measure developmental trends in understanding stories. In a few studies which have been undertaken to measure the impact of story retelling as an instructional strategy for developing skills (Brown & Cambourne, 2007; Khodabandeh, 2018; Martinez, 2007, Mello, 2001; Mohamed, 2005; Ray & Seely, 2004, 2008 Stoicovy, 2004), it was found that story telling increases language learners' language development, comprehending language skills, and learning the structural elements used in the stories told and retold to children.

In another study Nguyen, et al. (2014) investigated how teachers in China used storytelling as an educational activity to teach Chinese as a foreign or second language in China. The participants were asked to write their perceptions about the benefits, practice, their interests, and challenges of storytelling strategy in Chinese classroom. Findings revealed that the participants preferred storytelling because it enhances language learning progress and language comprehension, and leads to community building and multicultural understanding.

Through using Telegram as a type of social networking, Khodabandeh (2018) investigated how stories shared to the language learners through Telegram Application affects EFL learners' oral language production. She told four stories to the experimental group through online classes. The participants in the experimental group were asked to summarize the retell the stories while the students in control group were asked to answer the comprehension questions at the end of each story. Findings revealed that Telegram Application affects the quality of the instruction and the participants in the experimental group had better performance that the control group in storytelling and answering the questions.

Isbell, et al. (2004) studies the impact of storytelling and story reading on 3-5 aged Children's language comprehension and development. They selected two groups of language learners. The same stories were selected and told to the two groups. While one group only listened to the stories, the other group listened to the stories while reading them through book. Both groups find the instructions, but the participants who only heard the stories had better comprehension. Similarly, Kalantari and Hashemian (2016) attempted to revisit the effect of storytelling on developing Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. They found that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of vocabulary knowledge, verifying that storytelling is an effective teaching strategy for improving EFL learners' language progress. They also found that storytelling significantly affects the language learners' motivation for learning English.

With regard to the roles which storytelling can play in developing language learning, it seems that a large number of studies focused on the importance of storytelling in developing L1 and L2 learners' language proficiency through employing quantitative surveys and experimental/quasi-experimental research designs. Particularly, using storytelling and story reading in developing oral production and recognition of EFL learners has not yet, to the researchers' knowledge, been researched. With regard to the significance of the issue and the literature gap on it, this study aimed at investigating the role of storytelling and story reading in enhancing the oral production and comprehension of EFL students.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 90 male Iranian EFL learners studying at Milad Nour language institute in Tehran. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 32 years (mean = 26, SD = 2.2). They were selected from six pre-intermediate classes, each consisting of 15 language learners at the above-mentioned language institute. All language learners were taught by one experienced teacher. The language learners' level of proficiency was assessed based on the results of the placement test administered by the education department of the language institute. The classes were selected through convenience sampling. Based on the record of language institute assessment, all of the selected language learners were evaluated as pre-intermediate. Two of the intact classes were assigned to the control group, two of them were coded as experimental group 1 (storytelling) and the other two intact classes were labeled experimental group 2 (story reading). To check the initial differences among the groups, the researcher administered a pre-test that served as the placement (see pre-test in the following section). This test consists of two modules: Oral comprehension and oral production. The students in control and experimental groups were found to be homogenous.

Instruments

Three different instruments were used in this study. Each is explained as follows.

Pretest

The pretest consisted of two modules. The first module consisted of true-false, fill in blanks, and multiple-choice items which aimed at measuring the language learners' ability to comprehend the selected stories. The second module consisted of 10 open-ended questions about the plot, events, characters, and settings of the selected stories. The reliability of the listening section was estimated by running KR-21, while the reliability of the oral production was estimated through the inter-rater reliability approach. That is, the speaking ability of the test takers was evaluated by two raters who received enough training on scoring rubric, and then the correlation coefficient between the scores given by the two raters was estimated through running Pearson Product correlation. The reliability of the listening module was reported to be 0.87, while the reliability of the oral production was 0.82. The content validity of the instrument was verified by three experienced English language teachers.

Posttest

Like the pretest, the post-test consisted of two modules. The first module consisted of true-false, fill in blanks, and multiple-choice items which aimed at measuring the language learners' ability to comprehend the stories used in the classroom. The second module consisted of 10 open-ended questions about the plot, events, characters, and settings of the above-mentioned stories. The reliability of the listening section was estimated by running KR-21, while the reliability of the oral production was estimated through the inter-rater reliability approach. That is, the oral production ability of the test takers was evaluated by two raters, and then the correlation coefficient between the scores given by the two raters was estimated through running

Pearson Product correlation. The reliability indices of the listening module and the oral production section were 0.89 and 0.84, respectively.

Procedure

In this study, a quasi-experimental study was used to assess the effect of different types of instruction on EFL learners' oral comprehension and production ability. In the first step of this phase, stories were downloaded. Then, among the intact classes, 6 pre-intermediate classes were selected, based on the language institute's evaluation procedure. The selected participants were divided into three groups. The researcher searched the net using the phrase "stories for pre-intermediate English language learners. 13 stories were downloaded and converted into word document. One group of language learners only received the syllabus designed by the language institute. That is, the teacher only taught the content of the textbook based on the teacher Manuals However, to the language learners in group B, the researcher selected one story for each session and assigned it to the language learners in group B. Each language learner in this group was asked to read it at home extensively. However, the language learners in experimental group 2 were asked to tell the stories in the classroom and out of the classroom to their friends. When the treatment was over, the posttest was administered to all groups and the participants were asked to attempt the same test items.

Data Analysis

Finally, each participant was coded, the scores on pretest and posttest were entered into SPSS. Having checked the assumptions of ANOVA test, the researcher compared the variances of the three groups on the onset of the study to check for the initial differences. As there was no initial difference among the groups on the onset of the study, One-Way –ANOVA seemed to be appropriate and sufficient for the final analysis. As the difference among the groups' scores on the posttest was statistically significant, a post-hoc test (Bonferroni) was run.

RESULTS

Research Question One

The first research question aimed at investigating the impact of storytelling and story reading on improving EFL learners' oral production. Having checked the assumptions of the parametric data (normality assumption and homogeneity of the variances), the groups' mean scores on the oral production test were submitted to a one-way ANOVA test, and a post-hoc test (Bonferroni).   Descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveals that the mean scores of the storytelling group, story reading, and without story groups on the speaking test are 23.5 (SD = 2.2), 19.1(SD = 2.1), and 16.20 (SD = 1.4), respectively, which seem to be different.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the three groups' oral production test

Test	Groups	N	Mean	SD
Oral production	Storytelling	30	23.5	2.2
	Story reading	30	19.1	2.1
	Conventional	30	16.20	1.4

To check whether the three groups' scores were statistically different a one - way ANOVA test was run. Findings (Table 2) show that the variances of the three groups' scores on oral production were statistically different ($F_{(2, 87)} = 146.71$, p= 0.001< 0.05). Therefore, it could be strongly argued that Storytelling and Story reading approaches have a significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' oral production ability.

Table 2. ANOVA test for comparing the groups' variances on oral production test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Oral production	Between Groups	299.23	2	146.71	45.42	.001
	Within Groups	212.70	87	4.55		
	Total	512.93				

To locate the sources of the difference, a post hoc test (Bonferroni) was run. Results (See Table 3) showed that the difference between the storytelling and story reading groups is statistically significant, favoring storytelling group (p = 0.001, mean difference = 4.4). Results also show that the difference between story reading and conventional groups is significant, favoring the story reading group (p = 0.001, mean difference = 2.8). Therefore, it can be strongly argued that storytelling and story reading techniques do not have the same impact on improving pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production ability. That is, storytelling more significantly contributes to enhancing EFL learners' oral production than story reading technique.

Table 3. Results of Bonferroni test for comparing the three groups' mean scores on oral production test

Dependent Variable	(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Oral production	Storytelling	Story reading	4.4	.001
		Conventional	7.3	.001
	Story reading	Conventional	2.8	.001

Research Question Two

Research question 2 aimed at investigating the impact of storytelling and story reading on improving EFL learners' listening comprehension .Having checked the safety checks of ANOVA (normal distribution, homogeneity of variances), the groups' mean scores on the oral comprehension posttest were submitted to an ANOVA test, and a post-hoc test (Bonferroni). As it is shown in the Table 4, the mean scores of the storytelling, story reading, and conventional groups on the oral comprehension test are 24.3 (SD=1.7), 20.00 (SD=1.4), and 16.3 (SD=2.1), respectively, which are different.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the groups' scores on listening comprehension

Test	Groups	N	Mean	SD
Comprehension test	Storytelling	30	24.3	1.7
	Story reading	30	20.00	1.4
	Conventional	30	16.3	2.1

To check whether the differences were statistically significant or not, a one-way ANOVA test was run. As shown in Table 5, the variances of the three groups' scores on oral comprehension posttest were statistically different (F $_{(2, 87)}$ = 410.12, p= 0.001< 0.05). Therefore, it could be strongly argued that storytelling and story reading techniques have a significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' oral comprehension.

Table 5. ANOVA test for comparing the groups' variances on oral comprehension test.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Comprehension test	Between Groups	820.300	2	410.150	126.125	.001
	Within Groups	186.100	87	3.212		
	Total	998.400				

A posttest Hoc test was run for locating the differences. As shown in table 6, the difference between the storytelling and story reading groups is statistically significant, favoring storytelling group (p=0.001, mean difference=4.3). Results also show that the difference between story reading and conventional groups is significant, favoring the story reading group (p= 0.001, mean difference=3.7). Therefore, it can be strongly argued that storytelling and story reading techniques do not have the same impact on improving pre-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension. That is, storytelling more significantly contributes to enhancing EFL learners' oral comprehension skill than does story reading technique.

Table 6. Results of Bonferroni test for comparing the three groups' mean scores

Dependent Variable	(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
comprehension test	Storytelling	Story reading	4.3[*]	.001
		Conventional	6.00[*]	.001
	Story reading	conventional	3.7[*]	.001

DISCUSSION

The purpose this study was to investigate whether story retelling and reading tasks significantly affects Iranian language learners' oral production and comprehension. The independent variable consisted of three levels: storytelling, story reading, and conventional classes (without stories) and the groups' scores on the oral production and comprehension tests were coded as dependent variables. Preliminary safety checks for ANOVA were tested. The researcher felt on the safer ground that the assumptions of ANOVA including linearity, normality, and homogeneity of variances were not violated. Findings showed that the variances of the three groups' scores on oral production were statistically different. To locate the sources of the difference, a post hoc test (Bonferroni) was run. It was found that storytelling group outperformed story reading group, and conventional group obtained the lowest mean score on the oral production test the difference between the storytelling and story reading groups was statistically significant, favoring storytelling group (p=0.001, mean difference=4.4). Results also show that the difference between story reading and conventional groups is significant, favoring the story reading group (p= 0.001, mean difference=2.8). Therefore, it can be strongly argued that storytelling and story reading techniques do not have the same impact on improving pre-intermediate EFL learners' oral production ability. That is, storytelling more significantly contributes to enhancing EFL learners' oral production than story reading technique. This finding is echoing the results of the study by Kalantari and Hashemian (2016) who reported that stories

are effective for improving language learners' language skills. Therefore, it can be strongly argued that storytelling is more effective than story reading in improving the language learners' oral production.

Regarding research question 2, it was found that both storytelling and story reading were effective in improving EFL learners' oral language comprehension, and storytelling was more effective than story reading approach. Therefore, it could be strongly argued that the present findings are consistent with the findings of several studies (e.g., Morrow, 1985; Jianing, 2007; Stoicovy, 2004; Gambrell &. Dromsky, 2000). Moreover, in line with Kalantari and Hashemian (2016), it can be inferred that through using the storytelling strategy, the environment of the classroom changes from a "boring one to a warm environment full of student concentration, participation and production" (p.320). Through synthesizing the previous empirical studies, more particularly Mokhtar, Halim, & Kamarulzama (2011), it can be postulated that stories are superior to the traditional teaching methods in teaching listening skill in various ways. More particularly, it provides a better learning context for EFL learners; it is effective in increasing the learners' motivation to participate in the classroom discussions and interactions with the other members of the classroom. Stories are effective in providing EFL the pleasure and enjoyment that affect EFL learners' language achievement positively; are very good teaching techniques because they arouse the students' interest and motivation and help them create stories and vivid mental images, which in turn activate the language learners' thinking process. More significantly, stories make events and concepts connected, which help the language learners understand and recall information much better.

Findings are also consistent with studies undertaken by a number of studies (e.g., Abrashid, 2011; Soleimani, & Akbari, 2013) who stated that storytelling activities had significant positive effect on the less proficient young adults' earning of vocabulary. Similarly, the findings are in line with Mohamed (2005), who had attempted to assess the effects of storytelling tasks on elementary EFL students' language development, and argued that

storytelling positively contributed to the elementary students' vocabulary learning. Furthermore, the findings verify the results of the study by Joyce (2011) who investigated effects of song picture books on kindergarten children's vocabulary acquisition and reported that using song picture book, which narrates story, positively affects the vocabulary acquisition of kindergarten students.

In line with the conclusions made by Richards (2006), it can be argued that storytelling task makes natural communication in EFL classrooms easy by providing them with the authentic use of English language. As argued by Kalantari and Hashemian (2016), with storytelling, language learners are exposed to English language in the classroom and that makes learning new words for them easy. Besides, another argument for the superiority and effectiveness of the storytelling task is deeply rooted in the fact that EFL students are given the chance to listen to stories orally which helps them develop a deep and rich understanding of the words, idioms, and phrases. The results are also echoing Brown (2007) who stated that, as teachers of English language seek for ways and strategies to use communicative based teaching activities onto English language classrooms, they have to bear in mind that the goal is not to teach knowledge, but rather to help the language learners develop their learning ability.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In line with the findings, it can be concluded that EFL teachers need to bear in mind that storytelling and story reading approaches are useful for teaching English language and use them to develop the language learners' competence to think more creatively and clearly express their understanding in various ways. Storytelling can promote learning in the context more meaningfully, naturally, and interactively through motivating language learners and creating the opportunities for them to use English language in the classroom. In the first place, storytelling positively affects EFL learners' confidence to encounter learning challenges and bring their creativity and

inner imagination to the forefront the related challenges (González, 2010). More specifically, EFL teachers can provide the language learners with stories based on their level of proficiency, as supplementary instructional materials. They can also use stories as comprehensible input to foster language learners' learner autonomy. Reading and telling stories out of the classroom can also increase the language learners' exposure to authentic language, which might not happen in classrooms. As this was a quasi-experimental study, the researcher could not select the participants randomly, the findings need to be interpreted and generalized cautiously. Due to the limitations of the study, the influential variables such as the participants' age, gender, and attitude to storytelling were not checked. Therefore, the other researchers are strongly recommended to undertake the same studies focusing on these variables. Moreover, the other researchers are suggested to investigate the impact of storytelling and reading tasks on language skills and subskills of EFL learners with different age ranges and proficiency levels. More importantly, a qualitative research design is needed to deeply delve into the language learners' reflections on the use of stories in EFL classrooms.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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