

Teachers' Perceptions of Using Storytelling Activities in Teaching English Speaking Skills to Young Learners in Kindergarten

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Abstract: The uttermost goal of teaching EFL to young learners (YLS) is to help them gradually be able to speak English freely, fluidly, and spontaneously. Among many methods used to achieve the above goal, it is using storytelling activities to enhance English speaking skills for YLS. This study, therefore, aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills to YLS. This study was conducted at a private kindergarten system (PKS) in Vietnam. The study involved 32 English teachers who were teaching English at there. A mixed-method research design was employed for the study with the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure the validity as well as reliability of the research. Data were collected through three instruments, including the questionnaires, interviews and observations. For analyzing the data, descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed. The findings of the study revealed that storytelling activities were implemented frequently in bilingual classes in the context, and that teachers not only found benefits of storytelling and drama activities in the improvement of English-speaking skills for YLS, but they also discovered that teachers encountered several challenges related to learners, teachers and the context when they used storytelling activities. This study is expected to shed light on the implementation of teaching speaking skills to YLS in the context in particular and in other kindergartens in general.

Keywords: Speaking skills, storytelling activities, young learners, bilingual classes, Vietnamese context

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become the most widely spoken language in the world. In an increasingly globalized society, the value of foreign language instruction is growing. Many research studies have shown that children make significant gains in various areas of development through shared storybook experiences (Rubin & Wilson, 1995; Snow, 2001; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002). Attempting to take up with the challenges of active pedagogy, storytelling techniques are used in English classes to help individuals enhance their speaking abilities, as Khaemane (2011) stated, "from literature, it has been found that from experts and language teachers' opinions, teaching English speaking skills through storytelling activities could be effective." Nowadays, more significantly, many types of research focus on strengthening EFL speaking abilities through the use of storytelling activities. (Harriott & Martin, 2004) stated, "storytelling needs no special equipment beyond the imagination and the power of listening and speaking to create artistic images." As a learning tool, storytelling can encourage students to explore their expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner.

Learners of all ages would like to develop their speaking abilities through "student-centered" storytelling activities. They will increase their speaking capacity and enhance spontaneous reflexes in the process of learning and communicating in English through activities like performances, demonstrations, and conversations. Although the use of storytelling in language education is common in Europe and America, bilingual preschools in Vietnam are still limited in their use of this strategy to boost English development. Preschool children's English speaking abilities should be improved. Storytelling activities could improve English speaking skills. Teachers need to enhance the learning experience through storytelling and acting abilities to promote individual English-speaking abilities. Students are motivated to study English due to the obvious exciting classes. As a result, the use of storytelling in preschool is critical. The current study aims to investigate the teachers' perceptions of

using storytelling activities in terms of the benefits and challenges in the enhancement of English speaking skills for YLs at PKS. The current study attempted to address the following research questions:

- a) What are the teachers' perceived benefits of using storytelling activities in teaching English skills to YLs?
- b) What are the teachers' perceived challenges of using storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills to YLs?

It is expected that the study will contribute to the current knowledge of speaking teaching strategies generally, and it may also be used as a reference for teachers to adjust their teaching strategies at kindergartens through the design of activities, helping YLs be more engaged in the learning process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is established from previous research that language learning is a sort of communication that requires the ability to share thoughts and ideas, and so the most important skill to develop while learning a second or foreign language is speaking. However, according to Bueno, Madrid, and McLaren (2006, p. 321), "speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners have to face." That is why teachers are required to employ different strategies in teaching English speaking skills to EFL learner. Among a variety of strategies, storytelling is considered to be effective, especially to YLs. Storytelling is the expressive depiction of concepts, opinions, life lessons, and individual experiences via tales or stories that arouse strong feelings and insights. This method of sharing stories is frequently suggested in children's literature and early childhood texts (Huck, Helper, & Hickman, 1989; Raines & Isbell, 1994). According to Maguire (1985), storytelling has a variety of benefits, such as boosting vocabulary and attentiveness as well as fostering young children's capacity for symbolism and metaphor. YLs improved in many different areas after taking part in a storytelling-based story time program. Furthermore, storytelling can be used to promote student engagement in the classroom. According to Liu, Liu, Wang, Chen, and Su (2012), storytelling offers the possibility of meaningful social interaction among students and it enhances interpersonal and story-related skills. In addition, storytelling boosts students' enthusiasm for learning, provides opportunity for practice, fosters imagination, and helps students improve their verbal talents and speaking skills (Gottel, 2011).

Regarding benefits of using storytelling in teaching English speaking skills to YLs, researchers have proved that storytelling has always been a valuable tool for EFL teachers, especially when it comes to teaching speaking skills to kindergarten students because it has its own appeal in classroom. YLs are encouraged to experiment with their voice, tone, eye contact, gestures, and other facial expressions when delivering stories, all of which are crucial characteristics of an effective speaker. According to Adrian (1988, p.209), speaking English through storytelling activities is natural for YLs because they have a real communicative need - one of the main reasons for learners to communicate in the classroom. YLs need to have motivation in learning. YLs' motivation in class is maintained via storytelling activities that help them develop their speaking abilities, and the teacher is thought to play an exceptionally significant role to motivate learners during the early learning period (Djigonović, 2012). In addition, storytelling helps preschoolers acquire memory of vocabulary and enlarge the number of words without which they cannot speak or listen effectively (Brakke & Houska, 2015). Finally, storytelling may help develop independent thought, critical and creative thinking and cooperative and social awareness skills, and it can help to reduce the stress associated with learning a second language.

In terms of challenges encountered by teachers in the application of storytelling in teaching English speaking skills to YLs, it has been found in literature that there may be young learner-related, teacher-related, and context-related challenges. Firstly, for example, young learners may cause challenges for teachers when they integrate storytelling in the classroom. YLs may not comprehend stories because of the low English ability. This might undermine students' enthusiasm and participation in the storytelling activities (Zafeiriadou, 2009). Second, regarding teacher-related challenges, for example, the majority of EFL teachers lack proficiency because they are not native English speakers, resulting in teachers' adopting easy activities such as repetitive drills and exercises so that teachers often rely on textbooks and classroom management patterns such as orders and requests instead of possible supplementary activities for English speaking skills enhancement such as songs, poems, short stories, or conversation (Al-Abri, 2008).

Finally, in terms of context-related challenges, for example, the time allotted for the entire lesson in class is insufficient for them to use any strategies, despite the fact that some teachers think that teaching speaking is crucial for language development. Besides, the length of the storytelling is based on the content. However, a kindergarten class lasts just 30 minutes. Storytelling activities cannot be accomplished because of time limitations.

In conclusion, using storytelling activities to enhance English speaking skills for YLs not only has a variety of benefits, but it also causes challenges to EFL teachers. It is necessary to EFL teachers to understand those benefits and challenges in any context.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Site and Participants

The current study aims to investigate English teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using storytelling activities in teaching speaking skills to YLs at private kindergarten system (PKS). The sample of the study was 32 English teachers. They are mostly from 22 to 30 years old. They are 4 male teachers (12.5%) and 28 female teachers (87.5%), having more than one year experience of teaching English to YLs. All the English teachers teach English in bilingual classes and high-quality classes of YLs aged from 5 to 6. They are both native-speaking teachers (25%) and Vietnamese teachers (75%). At the time of conducting this study, the teachers were required to use storytelling for teaching English speaking skills of YLs.

3.2. Research Instruments

This study employed a mixed methods research design which collected both quantitative and qualitative data through the employment of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

The questionnaire has two main parts: Part A, with five items, is about participant demographic information. Teachers were required to give their personal information, including their gender, age, number of years of teaching EFL up to now. Part B includes 26 items that delve deeper into teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges they face in using storytelling activities teaching English speaking skills to YLs. This part uses a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was **.910** for 8 items of benefits and **.940** for 18 items of challenges, so the reliability of the questionnaire is high. The second instrument was the semi-structured interviews used to collect qualitative data to support the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire. The interview has 7 questions used to ask the teachers about their perceptions towards the benefits and challenges of using storytelling activities.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

For data collection, first, the questionnaire was piloted with two teachers. Those two teachers were not involved in the study. It is necessary to ensure that the teachers could understand all questions and feel comfortable completing the questionnaire and the interview. As a result, changes were made to make it more appropriate for and consistent with research criteria, as well as easier to understand for the teachers. Second, 32 participated in the survey and 10 teachers volunteered to join the semi-structured interview. It took the teachers around 15 minutes to complete the final version of the questionnaire and 10 minutes to answer the final interview questions. For questionnaire data analysis, "descriptive statistics" with the calculation of mean scores and standard deviation through the use of SPSS Statistics version 20.0 were employed. To interpret the mean scores, based on calculated interval coefficient for three intervals in four points (4-1=3), intervals with the range of 0.75 (3/4) were arranged. The following criteria in the Likert type scale were used to interpret the data: M= 1.00 - 1.75: Strongly disagree, M= 1.76 - 2.50: Disagree, M= 2.51 - 3.25: Agree, and M= 3.26 - 4.00: Strongly agree. For interview data analysis, "thematic analysis" was employed. The teachers' responses were coded as T1, T2, T3, etc. to T10.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

4.1. Benefits of Storytelling Activities

Research question 1 attempted to explore teachers' perceived benefits of storytelling activities. The data collected from the questionnaire as well as interviews and observations are presented as follows:

It can be seen in Table 4.1 that most of the teachers agreed that using storytelling activities to teach English speaking skills to young learners have many benefits with mean scores ranging from 3.00 to 3.38. More specifically, storytelling activities help young learners develop their English speaking skills (item 1) with $M= 3.19$ & $St. D= .592$, enhance fluency (item 2) with $M = 3.00$ & $St. D = .568$, accuracy (item 3) with $M = 3.19$ & $St. D = .592$, interaction ability (item 4) with $M = 3.22$ & $St. D = .608$, and self-confidence (item 5) with $M = 3.38$ & $St. D = .609$, and increase motivation (item 6) with $M = 3.22$ & $St. D = .638$, enhance collaboration (item 7) with $M = 3.25$ & $St. D = .678$, and creation (item 8) with $M = 3.09$ & $St. D = .588$ for young learners in learning English speaking skill.

Table4.1. Descriptive Statistics of benefits of storytelling activities

No	Items	N	M	St. D
1	Storytelling activities help YLs develop their Englishspeaking skills.	32	3.19	.592
2	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance fluency in speaking English.	32	3.00	.568
3	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance accuracy in speaking English.	32	3.19	.592
4	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance interaction ability in speaking English.	32	3.22	.608
5	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance self-confidence in speaking English.	32	3.38	.609
6	Storytelling activities help YLs increase motivation in learning English speaking skills.	32	3.22	.638
7	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance collaboration for young learners in learning English speaking skills.	32	3.25	.672
8	Storytelling activities help YLs enhance creation for young learners in learning English speaking skills.	32	3.09	.588

Regarding the data collected from the interviews, it is evidence that the data are consistent with those collected from the questionnaire. All the interviewees reported that storytelling activities have many benefits when being used for teaching speaking skills to YLs. For example: “*Storytelling activities help increase learners’ interest in speaking English*” (T2); or “*once their listening skills get better, their speaking skills will automatically get impacted positively*” (T3); “*Storytelling activities improve children imagination, confidence as well as motivation in speaking English*” (T5); “*Using storytelling activities can enhance learner’s motivation, confidence.... especially toward high-level proficiency learners*” (T6); “*In my opinion, storytelling activities help students are confident and enhance speaking skills.*” (T8)

4.2. Challenges Teachers Face in the use of Storytelling Activities

Research question 2 attempted to explore teachers’ perceived challenges of using storytelling activities to teaching English speaking to YLs. The data collected from the questionnaire and interviews are presented in this section to display challenges related to learners, teachers, and the context.

Learner-Related challenges

It can be seen that Table 4.2 displays the descriptive statistics of learner-related challenges that teachers face in using storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills to YLs with mean scores ranging from 3.06 to 3.38. All the factors obtained teachers’ agreement. More specifically, “young learners do not have enough knowledge and language to understand English stories (items 1) with $M= 3.34$ & $SD= .545$, “young learners are not capable enough of thinking creatively and solving problems in storytelling activities” (items 2) with $M= 3.06$ & $SD= .435$, “be afraid of speaking English in storytelling activities” (items 3) with $M= 3.31$ & $SD= .644$, “attitudes of young learners towards learning English prevent teachers from using storytelling activities” (items 4) with $M= 3.06$ & $SD= .564$, “not much motivated to participate in storytelling activities” (items 5) with $M= 3.38$ & $SD=.55$.

Table4.2. Descriptive statistics of learner-related challenges

No	Items	N	M	St.D
1	Young learners do not have enough knowledge and language to understand English stories.	32	3.34	.545
2	Young learners are not capable enough of thinking creatively and solving problems in storytelling activities.	32	3.06	.435
3	Young learners may be afraid of speaking English in storytelling activities.	32	3.31	.644
4	The attitudes of young learners towards learning English prevents me from using storytelling activities.	32	3.06	.564
5	Young learners are not much motivated to participate in storytelling activities.	32	3.38	.554

Regarding the data collected from the interviews, it is evident that the data are in line with those collected from the questionnaire. All the interviewees reported that drama activities have many learner-related challenges when being used for teaching speaking skills to young learners. For example: “...as storytelling is nearly one-way interaction and speaking skill practice might be limited (T2); “...young learners have a lack of knowledge of the language, vocabulary. They frequently struggle with remembering a lot of language, grammar, and context, which makes it difficult for them to narrate tales in a fluid, clear manner” (T5) “... their listening skill and speaking are limited. A few learners can’t focus on the questions and understand the lesson. ..., especially toward high-level proficiency students” (T6). “Children often have difficulty retelling stories.” (T3)

Teacher-Related challenges

It can be seen that Table 4.3 shows the descriptive statistics of teacher-related challenges teachers face in English speaking skills to young learners with mean scores ranging from 3.13- 3.41. More specifically, most of the teachers **agreed** that “using storytelling activities certainly will increase young learners’ ability to speak English” (items 6) with M= 3.28 & SD= .683, “There is difficulty in assessing students’ performance when asking them to retell stories” (items 7) with M= 3.22 & SD= .659. “There is difficulty in managing the classroom when the young learners (items 8) with M=3.25 & SD = .672. Especially, “teachers do not have sufficient training on how to use storytelling activities” (items 9) with M=3.22 & SD=.491, “It takes teachers much time to meticulously prepare the lessons” (items 10) with M=3.31 & SD=.592, “English proficiency hinders the application of the activities” (items 11) with M= 3.38 & SD=.609, and “Teachers are not very confident enough to use storytelling activities to teach English language skills” (items 12) with M= 3.28 & SD= .729.

Table4.3. Descriptive Statistics of teacher-related challenges

No	Items	N	Mean	St.D
6	My belief is that using storytelling activities certainly will increase young learners’ ability to speak English.	32	3.28	.683
7	I have difficulty in assessing students’ performance when asking them to retell stories.	32	3.22	.659
8	I have difficulty in managing the classroom when the young learners have storytelling activities.	32	3.25	.672
9	I do not have sufficient training on how to use storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills.	32	3.22	.491
10	Using storytelling activities for teaching speaking skills frequently takes me much time to meticulously prepare the lessons.	32	3.31	.592
11	My English proficiency affects the application of storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills.	32	3.38	.609
12	I am not very confident to use storytelling activities to teach English language skills.	32	3.28	.729

Regarding data collected from the interviews, several interviewees reported that there were challenges related to the teachers themselves such as in-service training or managing the classroom during the learning process. For instance, some teachers reported: “...using storytelling activities is really helpful, however, it is not easy to implement with young children. I think a workshop should be organize to show teachers how to carry out those activities effectively with young children: (T2); “I sometimes find it difficult to manage the classroom because children are active, but they can’t concentrate to learning for a long time, and they get bored easily.” (T6)

Context-Related challenges

The data displayed in Table 4.5 show context-related challenges that the teachers faced in teaching English speaking skills to YLs with mean scores ranging from 3.13 to 3.41. It can be seen that among 6 factors, the teachers **strongly agreed** with 2 of them, including “large classes with more than 25 young learners prevent them from using storytelling activities (items 13) with M=3.41 & SD=.560, and “the school encourages them to use storytelling activities (items 16) with M= 3.41 & SD=.560. In addition, the teachers **agreed** with the rest 4 factors, including “the limited time allotted for storytelling activities (items 14) with M=3.13 & SD=.660, “not many stories which have relevant contents to the YLs at the age of 5-6” (items 15) with M=3.22 & SD=.608, “facilities prevent them

from being creative in designing storytelling activities (items 17) with $M= 3.34$ & $SD=.653$, and “Teachers are not provided enough materials and resources for designing activities” (item 18) with $M=3.28$ & $SD=.729$.

Table4.5. *Descriptive Statistics of context-related challenges*

No	Items	N	M	St. D
13	My large class with more than 25 young learners prevents me from using storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills.	32	3.41	.560
14	The time allotted for storytelling activities for young learners every week in class is limited.	32	3.13	.660
15	There are not many stories which have relevant content to the young learners at the age of 5-6.	32	3.22	.608
16	The school encourages me to use storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills.	32	3.41	.560
17	The facilities at my school prevent me from being creative in designing storytelling activities for the young learners.	32	3.34	.653
18	I am not provided enough materials and resources for designing storytelling activities English lessons.	32	3.28	.729

Regarding data collected from the interviews, it has been found that teachers also reported several similar opinions to the data collected from the questionnaire, showing that the learning environment also caused challenges for teachers when they implemented storytelling activities in the classroom. For example: “...story activities greatly contribute to the development of students' English language competency by fostering an engaging learning environment but time in class being very limited for storytelling activities” (T8); “As teachers are unable to create the content because there are too many communication and speaking norms in English. It is very difficult for us to find suitable materials which have storytelling activities” (T6); “I think many contents or topics of stories are too difficult for students to understand. As a result, it is hard for them to explain their ideas about these topics.” (T7)

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study is to explore teachers' perceptions of the benefits of using storytelling activities in teaching English speaking skills and challenges they face in the implementation of storytelling activities. Regarding the benefits, most of the teachers agreed that using storytelling activities to teach English speaking skills to young learners have many benefits. This finding of the study is in line with that of Ratih's study (2015) showing that the storytelling method may assist students to improve their public speaking skills. That might be because according to Adrian (1988), speaking English through storytelling activities is natural for YLs. They have a real communicative need - one of the main reasons for learners to communicate in the classroom, and using storytelling activities actually enhance learners in learning speaking skills (Djigonović, 2012). The finding of the study also revealed that storytelling activities help learners enhance their confidence. It can also be said that the storytelling activities employment in teaching speaking skills helps YLs able to express themselves, stimulate their imaginations, expand their vocabulary, and increase their passion for speaking. This finding is consistent with Satriani's study (2019), showing that storytelling has a lot of benefits in teaching and learning English speaking skills.

In terms of the challenges that teachers faced in the implementation of storytelling activities, the findings of the study revealed that teachers have experienced challenges relating to themselves, young learners, and the context which might also hinder the effectiveness of the teaching of English speaking skills to YLs in PKS. Regarding learner-related challenges, the finding of the current study is consistent with that of Satriani (2019) showing that learners do not have enough knowledge and language to understand English stories. Most young learners are 5-6 years old, so their abilities are limited, and they may be afraid of speaking English. However, this problem is not serious. Psychologically, at the age of 5 to 6 years old, young learners can develop both their native language and another language at the same time. Teachers should know that young learners can gradually acquire the language in both natural way and under the instruction of teachers. Although they are not capable enough of thinking creatively and solving problems in drama activities, they still imitate and learn from their friends and teachers.

In terms of teacher-related challenges, the finding of the study shows that teachers encountered several challenges such as lack of training, YLs' performance assessment, and classroom management. Obviously, challenges in classroom management cannot be avoided because it might be that the learners are still too young. They are only 5 to 6 years old. Each lesson is about 30 minutes. They can only concentrate to learning in a very short time. It might also be because they did not have sufficient training at college or university on how to organize storytelling activities for YLs or managing classes of YLs in kindergartens, leading to the fact that it takes them much time to meticulously prepare the lessons when using storytelling. Many of them also confirmed that their lack of English proficiency hindered the application of these activities in class. In addition, they are not confident enough to use storytelling. This finding of the study is in line with that of Yahya and Razali (2018) showing that challenges like insufficient training, time constraint, students' low proficiency, and exam-oriented and rigid education system hinders them from fully utilizing this strategy in their teaching practice.

Finally, with respect to context-related challenges, teachers perceived that during the time they applied storytelling activities they faced several challenges; it is evident that under the non-native learning environment, challenges cannot be avoided like lack of time, a problem faced by almost all EFL contexts. However, YLs at kindergartens may not need much time for learning because they can only concentrate in a short time when they are in class. The finding also revealed that each class has 25 learners, which cause difficulty for teachers. Actually, the number of 25 learners is not very large. However, teaching English to young learners, teachers need to pay attention to every individual; the teachers in the context might not have enough time to contact all of the members in their classes. Additionally, the facilities and materials are also considered as challenges. That is because when teachers organize activities, they may need some toys, small boards, boxes, desks to support the activities but these things are not available in the classroom. So, they could not make the activities more interesting and effective. Also, the teachers also complained about lack of materials. They might not have textbooks with sufficient storytelling activities for their learners, which is considered as a challenge hindering their teaching.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the current study have revealed that most of the teachers perceived that using storytelling activities for teaching English speaking skills have a variety of benefits for YLs. However, teachers also perceived that they cannot avoid challenges in the implementation of those activities. Those challenges are related to YLs, teachers and the context. The learners in the context are still too young to recognize the importance of learning English and so they need support and leadership from the teachers. To achieve the goals of teaching and learning English in bilingual classes in the context, it is necessary for the teachers to study more about the principles of using storytelling activities to teach English, especially discover how storytelling may be effectively carried out in EFL classes for YLs. Teachers' diverse techniques may attract students' participation and thus enhance their learning effectiveness. Managing a language classroom is always considered an art. To be able to get all the YLs in the class involved in the speaking task is also a requirement that any foreign language teacher has to meet. Only by doing so, can storytelling be successfully implemented in the context. Teachers should use simple language so that the YLs can understand the plot of storytelling. Storytelling activities are challenges for young learners aged from 4 to 5 because English abilities of YLs are different. So, teachers need to be patient and be able to adapt materials to fit YLs. Teachers also need to participate in-service training courses to enhance their pedagogical knowledge of how to teach English to YLs in kindergartens.

The study was conducted at PKG in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, with the participation of 32 teachers. Hence, the scope of the study is likely to be limited. Further studies should be conducted with a larger sample from other similar bilingual contexts.

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