

ENHANCING NARRATIVE SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON DEVELOPING ESL STUDENTS' STORY RETELLING ABILITIES AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates five primary school teachers' strategies in a private English medium school in Multan to develop narrative skills among ESL (English as a Second Language) students through story-retelling techniques. The research utilizes a comprehensive approach, incorporating teacher interviews, classroom observations, and the review of teaching materials. Thematic analysis reveals commonalities and differences in teaching methods, student engagement, and classroom learning environments. The findings underscore the significance of a holistic approach, encompassing vocabulary building, sentence structure, and coherence. Strategies such as using multimedia resources, role-playing, and incorporating cultural stories contribute to an immersive and inclusive learning environment. The study recognizes challenges, including diverse linguistic backgrounds and large class sizes, and proposes solutions such as integrated scheduling and fostering teamwork. The implications highlight the importance of professional development for teachers and the celebration of small achievements in cultivating a positive learning culture. The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to effective language instruction and cultural inclusivity. Future research directions could explore the long-term impact on overall language proficiency and assess the effectiveness of teacher professional development programs in enhancing story-retelling practices for ESL students.

Keywords: Narrative Skills, Story retelling, Vocabulary knowledge, Primary school students

INTRODUCTION

The oral recounting of causally related events is one definition of tale-telling (Peterson, 1990). According to Petersen et al. (2008), having strong recounting abilities from a young age is crucial in many areas of life, including school and social interactions. According to Stadler and Ward (2005), the first steps towards proficiency are directly linked to the idea of responsibility. Several studies have shown that this link affects the academic achievement of both normally developing and exceptionally gifted

students (Diehl et al., 2006; Spencer & Slocum, 2010; Stadler & Ward, 2005). In addition, being able to effectively communicate with others and engage in social interactions depends on having good communication skills. According to McCabe and Marshall (2006), those with a natural talent for storytelling can better use socially acceptable language in various contexts. When standardised tests do not provide sensitive enough assessments, accounts are useful assessment techniques for

identifying small differences in children's language development (Manolitsi & Botting, 2011). According to several studies (Kuijper et al., 2017; Gurmani et al., 2022a; Gurmani et al., 2022b), narrative evaluations have several advantages over formal language assessments. One advantage is that narrative evaluations consider not only the main aspects of a child's language, like lexical diversity, syntactic complexity, and sentence length but also the often-overlooked cohesive and referential components.

Storytelling is a common form of children's storytelling, and it has been suggested that it could be a measure of listening comprehension (Hagtvet, 2003; Lehto & Anttila, 2003; Norbury & Priest, 2002; Skarakis-Doyle et al., 2008; Westerveld & Gillon, 2010). Microstructure and macrostructure principles are often used to assess children's tales (Westerveld & Gillon, 2010; Allen, Ukrainetz, & Carswell, 2012). These principles, when combined, establish the qualities of a portrayal (Schneider et al., 2005). According to several studies (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Petersen, 2011; Westerveld & Gillon, 2010), the microstructure criteria include traits including attachment, discourse length, syntactic precision, and phonetic complexity. However, according to Schneider et al. (2005), Shahid, Abbasi, & Bhutto (2022), Shahid, Muhammed, Abbasi, Gurmani, & Rahman (2022), and Ahmed, Shahid, Ali, Akmal, & Arif (2022), the macrostructure can reveal information about two things: (1) the story's content and organisation, and (2) the learner's intelligence, which is measured by their ability to build a cohesive narrative structure and text in the target language.

The Development of Narrative Skills

A small body of literature has explored how children's story generation and retelling vary throughout developmental stages (Bohnacker, 2016; Mäkinen et al., 2014; Roch et al., 2016). The stories meant for children aged 3 to 4 are defined by their transient character, without a clear underlying purpose (Muñoz et al., 2003). More complicated tale structures emerge later in development, but at this time, narratives mostly include a straightforward series of events (Kendeou et al., 2008). As Muñoz et al. (2003) stated, using language to express stories

and understand the characters' intentions starts when a kid is five years old. Stadler and Ward (2005) found five separate phases to how children's storytelling abilities develop: naming, listing, linking, sequencing, and describing. The growth of story structure and its correlation with story efficacy concerning image-evoked descriptions were the primary foci of Mäkinen et al. (2014). When comparing children aged four and five, as well as those aged five and six, there were notable differences in referential connection, levels of production, and event content. The impact of age on the maturation of macrostructure and narrative comprehension in Swedish and English-speaking bilingual children was examined in a different research by Bohnacker (2016). The sample included 5-year-olds as opposed to 6-7 year-olds. Roch et al. (2016) looked at a group of normally developing Italian-English consecutive bilingual youngsters (ages 5-7 and 6-7) and how they built their accounts and became aware of their surroundings. On every measure of macrostructure, older children outperformed younger ones. Using Greek youngsters between the ages of four and seven, Kanellou et al. (2016) found comparable preliminary results.

The research by Wehmeier (2020) examined three age groups 4-11, 5-11, and 6-11 to illuminate the substantial impact of age on children's story retellings. There is a negative link between the starting point of picture book perception at age 5 and the following rate of improvement from age 5 to age 9, according to a recent longitudinal research by Lepola et al. (2020). Most studies on narrative development have employed fictitious narratives rather than tale retellings. Therefore, there is no data on how narratives develop in normally developing youngsters. Furthermore, children with developmental delays or who are multilingual have often been left out of these research samples. Formative variations in macrostructure, rather than microstructure restrictions, have mostly been the focus of previous studies.

The Interconnection of Story Retelling and Narrative Skill

Recounting a narrative requires a wide range of cognitive abilities, including listening attentively, remembering details, and using implicit and explicit language. Abbasi, Shahid, & Shah 2022; Shahid,

Abbasi, & Asif 2022; Gurmani, Latiff, Abbasi, Jatoi, & Shahid 2023 all agree that phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure are all part of a language's competency. Further details on the nature, scope, and comprehension of the universe's workings are essential (Allen et al., 2012; Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 2004). Diehl, Bennetto, and Youthful (2006) state that when we tell a story, we need to understand it, remember it, and then put it together in a way that makes sense to the listeners. Most stories are structured using a detailed framework that allows the Author to arrange components like locations, narratives, and episodes predictably.

A strong incentive to learn a new language is the opportunity to expand one's vocabulary by acquiring specialised terms. According to earlier studies (Kendeou et al., 2008; Roch & Hržica, 2020), responsive language significantly influences children's comprehension of tales at the ages of 4 and 6. Jalongo and Sobolak (2011) and Lepola et al. (2012) found that preschoolers were likelier to tell tales when they used open and expressive language. It should be noted, nevertheless, that most prior research has only utilised one metric to evaluate vocabulary, such as a multiple-choice exam or activities requiring the identification or explanation of words. Researchers could gain a better understanding of the impact of different jargon abilities on retelling if they used a variety of measures to evaluate jargon information simultaneously (such as listening perception, open jargon, naming, and word definition tasks, as was done in the current review) to create a more stable variable of jargon expertise (Akmal et al., 2022; Shahid et al., 2022d).

A person's phonological competence may be defined as mastery of spoken words' phonetic representation (Saygin et al., 2013). An explanation for the relationship between phonological awareness and narrative discourse form is put forward by Bialystok (1986, 1993, 1999). Two theories form the basis of the Author's framework. One theory states that children practicing metalinguistic mindfulness tend to become more proficient in their language skills (Farrar et al., 2005). The other theory states that all language usage is supported by underlying cognitive processes that involve metacognitive awareness and cognitive control (Bialystok, 1993).

The capacity to alter important components of a representation in problem-solving is known as cognitive control, whereas the ability to study language structure is known as illustrative analysis (Bialystok, 1999). Testing children's phonological awareness involves focusing on the phonetics of words rather than their meaning (Gurmani et al., 2023; Shahid et al., 2019). This will put their analytical abilities and cognitive control to the test in a big way. Because good storytelling depends on the narrator's understanding of narrative structure, phonological mindfulness the activity of mindfully recalling stories requires meticulous attention to structure (McKeough et al., 2008).

While most would agree that preschool is a time when children's language, literacy, and code-related skills come together, few studies have examined how pre-kindergarteners phonological awareness relates to their narrative structure (Hipfner-Boucher et al., 2014). In an effort to shed light on a neglected field, this research sets out to do just that. Possessing morphological competence is paying attention to and being able to work with words' morphemic structure, which includes their bases/stems, suffixes, and prefixes (Kuo & Anderson, 2006). Several languages have recognised the correlation between morphological abilities and reading and spelling abilities; Greek and English are among them (Diamanti et al., 2017).

The incorporation of phonetic structures, such as linguistic units and lexical variety, is essential when narrating events and their effects within a wider framework for the audience to understand (Akmal et al., 2022; Shahid et al., 2022). According to Capps et al. (2000) and Losh & Capps (2003), a child must use complex sentence structures and morphology, precise terminology, pronouns, and transitional connectives to successfully convey causal and transitory relationships in narratives. According to Wagner et al. (2007) and other research, there is a connection between early children's morphological competence and their vocabulary knowledge. The empirical evidence for the role of morphological abilities in retelling is not well-established because of a lack of research. Therefore, studying how children's morphological skills impact their story-retelling abilities is crucial. Realistic abilities are also required for the act of narrative recitation. According to Yule (2006) and

Martin and McDonald (2003), pragmatics relies on the semantic context, which pertains to the communicative goals of speakers. A child's usage of numerous realistic elements is required when they recite stories. Some examples of these include following a logical order of events, using suitable language to build a coherent discourse, using a well-structured narrative, keeping the audience in mind, and many more. Thus, recalling a story should be linked to a child's cognitive capacity. However, the proof is not there to back up that theory. Little is known about children's pragmatic competence when it comes to telling tales, even though assessing narratives is a way to measure pragmatic knowledge (Botting, 2002; Fernández, 2013).

Furthermore, there is a knowledge vacuum about the potential long-term changes in the associations above between oral language ability and story memory. Researchers ran a long-term longitudinal study to investigate how language plays a part in understanding narrative picture books. In this study, children between the ages of 5 and 9 were asked perception-based questions using a retelling assignment (Lepola et al., 2020). Results showed that specialist language substantially affected preschoolers' ability to understand picture books but no effect on older children.

The Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this qualitative study is to gain insights into the teaching methods educators employ to enhance ESL students' narrative skills through story retelling at the primary school level.

Research Questions:

1. What teaching methods do educators utilize to improve ESL students' narrative skills in story retelling?
2. How do teachers adapt their instructional approaches to address the diverse linguistic backgrounds of ESL students?
3. What challenges and successes do teachers encounter in implementing strategies to enhance students' narrative abilities?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study is a qualitative research design focused on understanding and exploring the teaching strategies employed by primary school teachers to

enhance the narrative skills of ESL (English as a Second Language) students during story-retelling activities. The study involves a combination of interviews, observations, and the review of teaching materials to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis.

Sampling: Primary school teachers possessing expertise in instructing ESL students and implementing strategies for narrative skill development were selected through purposeful sampling. This method aimed to identify five teachers based on teaching experience, ESL proficiency, and diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Data Collection: Following the selection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the chosen teachers. During the research, teachers were observed in the context of story-retelling sessions with ESL students. Teachers were observed teaching two stories: Thirsty Crow and Greed is a Curse. An observation checklist was employed to systematically document teaching methods, student engagement, and overall classroom dynamics. This approach facilitated capturing verbal and non-verbal interactions between teachers and students. Additionally, the study involved collecting and reviewing teaching materials educators utilize for narrative skill development.

Data Analysis: The analysis focused on assessing the alignment of these materials with language proficiency levels and cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, an evaluation was conducted regarding the variety and appropriateness of story selections. Qualitative data obtained from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and the examination of teaching materials were analyzed. This involved the identification of recurring themes associated with effective teaching strategies, challenges encountered, and successful approaches. Patterns in teaching methods that correlated with enhanced narrative skills in ESL students were explored, and commonalities and differences in approaches among participating teachers were identified. A cross-referencing process was implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, integrating information from interviews, observations, and teaching materials. A triangulation approach was employed to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent

was obtained from participating teachers, and measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of reported findings. Additionally, the intellectual property rights of teaching materials were respected.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process for the above study employed a rigorous and systematic approach, drawing insights from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and the review of teaching materials. Initially, thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data gathered from interviews, focusing on identifying recurring themes related to effective teaching strategies, challenges faced, and successful approaches in narrative skill development. This involved systematically coding and categorizing responses to uncover patterns and shared practices among participating teachers. Concurrently, classroom observations were conducted using a predefined checklist to document ideal teaching methods, student engagement levels, and the overall classroom learning environment. The qualitative findings from interviews and observations were then triangulated with the review of teaching materials to ensure data reliability and validity. The analysis process involved continuous refinement, cross-referencing, and pattern recognition to distill meaningful insights into the varied approaches employed by teachers in enhancing ESL students' narrative skills through story retelling at the primary school level.

Analysis of the Teachers' Responses

Teacher 1: *“My teaching methods prioritize a holistic approach to narrative skill development. We begin with building a strong foundation in vocabulary through interactive word games and discussions related to the story. I emphasize the importance of sentence structure and coherence, encouraging students to practice storytelling in pairs or small groups. Visual aids, such as story maps and character illustrations, are also incorporated to enhance comprehension and expression.”*

Teacher 2: *“Engaging ESL students in story retelling involves creating an immersive experience. I often use multimedia resources, including videos and audio clips, to make the story more accessible. To ensure active participation, I encourage students to take on different roles within the story and express their perspectives. Additionally, incorporating elements of their own cultural stories into the curriculum fosters a sense of inclusivity and relevance.”*

Teacher 3: *“Managing varying proficiency levels requires a flexible approach. For students with lower proficiency, I provide simplified versions of the story, additional vocabulary support, and use more visual aids. On the other hand, for those with higher proficiency, I challenge them with more complex narratives, encouraging them to delve into deeper discussions and explore advanced language structures. This differentiation ensures that all students are appropriately challenged and supported.”*

Teacher 4: *“One notable challenge is the diverse linguistic backgrounds in our classroom. Selecting stories that resonate with different cultures and languages can be intricate but is crucial for inclusive learning. Large class sizes and limited time also present obstacles. However, witnessing the growth in students' confidence and their ability to construct meaningful narratives is a significant success. Small achievements, like improved use of descriptive language, contribute to the overall positive trajectory.”*

Teacher 5: *“To address time constraints, I've integrated story retelling into our weekly schedule, ensuring a dedicated time for these activities. Managing large classes involves fostering a sense of teamwork among students, where they can support and learn from each other. Celebrating successes involves personalized feedback, recognizing individual improvements, and occasionally showcasing outstanding stories. This creates a supportive environment and encourages students to take ownership of their narrative development.”*

Table 1. Summary of the Thematic Analysis of the Teachers' Responses

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Themes
Teaching Methods	Holistic approach	Overview of Teaching Methods
	Vocabulary building	
	Sentence structure and coherence	
	Visual aids	
	Interactive discussions	
Engaging ESL Students	Multimedia resources	Strategies for Engaging ESL Students
	Role-playing	
	Incorporation of cultural stories	
Adaptations for Proficiency Levels	Simplified versions for lower proficiency	Management of Adaptations
	Additional vocabulary support	
	Challenges for higher proficiency	
	Advanced language structures	
Challenges and Successes	Diverse linguistic backgrounds	Perceived Challenges and Successes
	Time constraints	
	Large class sizes	
	Growth in confidence	
	Improved descriptive language	
Handling Challenges and Building Successes	Integrated schedule for story retelling	Handling Perceived Challenges
	Teamwork among students	
	Celebrating small achievements	

Table 1.1. Overall Classroom Learning Environment

1. Support for Varying Proficiency Levels	Is there evidence of differentiation to support varying English proficiency levels?	3
2. Inclusive Environment	Does the classroom environment foster inclusivity and cultural sensitivity?	4
3. Teamwork among Students	Do students work collaboratively, supporting each other in their narrative skill development?	4
4. Celebration of Achievements	Is there a system for acknowledging and celebrating small achievements in narrative skills?	3

This thematic analysis identifies key initial codes, sub-themes, and main themes from the teachers' responses, providing a structured overview of the insights shared by each teacher.

Table 2. Summary of the Checklist used to observe the classes

Observation Checklist	Criteria for Evaluation	Rating (1-5)
Ideal Teaching Methods		
1. Holistic Approach	Are teaching methods comprehensive, addressing vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence?	4
2. Vocabulary Building	Is there evidence of vocabulary-building activities, such as word games or discussions related to the story?	5
3. Sentence Structure and Coherence	Are students encouraged to practice storytelling in pairs or groups, emphasizing coherent narrative construction?	5
4. Visual Aids	Are visual aids, such as story maps or character illustrations, used to enhance comprehension and expression?	4
5. Interactive Discussions	Are there opportunities for interactive discussions related to the story content?	4
Student Engagement Level		
1. Multimedia Resources	Is multimedia, such as videos or audio clips, used to make the story more engaging and accessible?	5
2. Role-playing	Do students actively participate through role-playing or taking on different roles within the story?	4
3. Incorporation of Cultural Stories	Is there an effort to incorporate elements of students' cultural stories into the curriculum for relevance?	2

Table 2 provides a clear layout for assessing student engagement levels and the overall classroom learning environment based on the specified criteria. The rating by the nominated teacher to observe the classes shows the teachers were putting their efforts to collaborate narrative skills among the young children, but there is a lot to do to support the proficiency and encouragement of the young kids so they can master these skills proficiently.

Pattern Recognition of teaching methods of the selected Teachers

the commonalities and differences among participating teachers' responses across the themes of teaching methods, strategies for engaging ESL students, management of adaptations for varying proficiency levels, perceived challenges and

successes in improving narrative skills, and handling perceived challenges and building on successes. The identified patterns highlight shared approaches and unique strategies each teacher employs in the context of narrative skill development. Table 3 summarizes the commonalities and the differences.

Table 3 summary of the teaching pattern recognition

Themes	Commonalities	Differences
Teaching Methods for Narrative Skill Development	Holistic approach to narrative development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasis on building vocabulary through interactive games and discussions related to the story. 2. Encouragement of storytelling in pairs or small groups. 3. Use visual aids such as story maps and character illustrations to enhance comprehension and expression.

DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

1. Teaching Methods for Narrative Skill Development:

Commonalities: All teachers prioritize a holistic approach, integrating vocabulary building, sentence structure, and coherence. The emphasis on interactive activities and visual aids aligns with best practices for language development (Snow, 2008).

Differences: The variation in strategies, such as encouraging storytelling in pairs or small groups and using multimedia resources, indicates diverse but effective approaches (Cazden, 2001; Kress, 2003).

2. Strategies for Engaging ESL Students in Story Retelling:

Commonalities: Teachers share a focus on creating an immersive experience and incorporating cultural stories for inclusivity. These align with the principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010).

Differences: Using multimedia resources and encouraging students to take on different roles demonstrates creativity in engaging ESL learners (Gee, 2003).

3. Management of Adaptations for Varying English Proficiency Levels:

Commonalities: A flexible approach to accommodate varying proficiency levels is a shared strategy. This aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001).

Differences: Tailoring strategies for lower proficiency (simplified versions, additional support) and higher proficiency (complex narratives, deeper discussions) demonstrate a nuanced understanding of student needs (Cummins, 2000).

4. Perceived Challenges and Successes in Improving Narrative Skills:

Commonalities: Recognition of diverse linguistic backgrounds as a challenge is consistent, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity (Delpit, 2006).

Differences: Individual challenges like story selection and class size demonstrate unique contextual factors. Celebrating small achievements aligns with the positive reinforcement approach (Skinner, 1953).

5. Handling Perceived Challenges and Building on Successes:

Commonalities: Integrating story retelling into the weekly schedule is a practical solution. Fostering teamwork and celebrating successes resonate with the principles of collaborative learning and positive reinforcement (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1977).

Differences: Unique strategies, such as showcasing outstanding stories, demonstrate a commitment to individualized recognition (Brophy, 1981).

The teachers' responses indicate a thoughtful and diverse set of strategies for narrative skill development in ESL students. Commonalities suggest shared pedagogical principles, while differences highlight each teacher's individualized and creative approaches. Recognizing challenges and proactive measures to address them, along with celebrating small achievements, underscores a student-centric and positive learning environment.

Significance for Narrative Skills Development in Language Teaching

The observed emphasis on vocabulary building, sentence structure, and coherence underscores the significance of story retelling in narrative skills development. These are foundational elements of language proficiency (Snow, 2008). The use of diverse teaching methods, including interactive discussions and visual aids, aligns with best practices for language acquisition (Cazden, 2001; Shahid et al., 2023; Shahid et al., 2019). Moreover, incorporating cultural stories fosters a sense of inclusivity and relevance, catering to the diverse backgrounds of ESL students (Gay, 2010). Story retelling is a powerful tool for language teachers to effectively address varying proficiency levels. The differentiation strategies employed, such as providing simplified versions for lower proficiency and challenging higher proficiency students with complex narratives, showcase an inclusive and tailored approach to language instruction (Cummins, 2000; Shahid et al., 2020; Shahid et al., 2019; Sabeen et al., 2023). The identified challenges, such as diverse linguistic backgrounds and large class sizes, emphasize the need for ongoing professional development and support for teachers (Razaq et al., 2023; Mukhtar et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023; Mukhtar et al., 2023a). Creating a culturally inclusive environment requires continuous exploration of diverse stories and resources, encouraging educators to stay abreast of multicultural literature. Celebrating small achievements contributes to a positive classroom culture and student motivation. Incorporating personalized feedback and showcasing outstanding stories acknowledges individual progress and encourages a sense of pride and ownership in students' narrative development.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the teachers' responses reveal a rich tapestry of strategies employed in teaching narrative skills through story retelling in ESL classrooms. The commonalities underscore a shared commitment to holistic language development, encompassing vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence. Activities such as role-playing and multimedia resources contribute to an immersive and culturally inclusive learning environment.

Additionally, the teachers demonstrate adaptability by tailoring their approaches to varying English proficiency levels, showcasing a nuanced understanding of student needs. Challenges identified, such as managing diverse linguistic backgrounds and large class sizes, are acknowledged with a solution-oriented mindset. The integration of story retelling into the weekly schedule, fostering teamwork, and celebrating small achievements contribute to a positive and supportive classroom culture. These practices align with educational theories emphasizing collaborative learning, positive reinforcement, and culturally responsive teaching. Future research in this domain could delve deeper into the impact of specific teaching methods on different aspects of narrative skill development. Comparative studies analyzing the effectiveness of multimedia resources, role-playing, and cultural story incorporation could provide valuable insights. Exploring the long-term effects of story retelling on ESL students' overall language proficiency and academic performance would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of its benefits. Additionally, investigating the role of teacher professional development programs in enhancing story-retelling practices could offer valuable guidance for educational institutions. In conclusion, the multifaceted approach to narrative skills development through story retelling presented by the teachers in this study has implications for language teaching and fostering a culturally responsive and inclusive educational environment. As the field continues to evolve, further research endeavors can illuminate new avenues for enhancing language instruction and supporting the diverse needs of ESL students.

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