

Examining the Effectiveness of Storytelling in Developing English Language Skills among Preschool Children

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of storytelling in developing English language skills among preschool children, with a focus on vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking. Language development in early childhood is foundational for literacy, cognitive growth, and socio-emotional skills, yet many Malaysian preschoolers have limited exposure to English. Storytelling offers a developmentally appropriate, engaging, and interactive approach that combines verbal expression, visual aids, gestures, and narrative structure to provide meaningful language experiences. Using a qualitative observational method, ten preschool-aged children participated in structured storytelling sessions, and their language use, pronunciation attempts, and participation were systematically observed. Findings reveal that storytelling significantly enhances vocabulary acquisition, improves pronunciation accuracy, and fosters self-confidence in oral communication. Children demonstrated increased engagement, willingness to participate, and ability to apply newly learned words and expressions in meaningful contexts. The study underscores the importance of teacher scaffolding, parental involvement, and structured storytelling activities in early childhood curricula. Overall, storytelling emerges as a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting English language development, social-emotional growth, and lifelong communication skills in preschool learners.

Keywords: Storytelling, English Language Development, Vocabulary Acquisition, Pronunciation Skills, Speaking Confidence

Introduction

Language is a central tool for human communication, enabling individuals to express ideas, build relationships, and participate in cultural and social practices that shape identity and learning (Sandmark, 2014). In early childhood, language acquisition provides the foundation for later literacy, cognitive development, and socio-emotional growth. Children who experience rich linguistic environments tend to develop stronger vocabulary, reasoning skills, and communication abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

As English continues to function as a global medium in education, technology, business, and international communication, young learners increasingly need meaningful exposure to English from an early age (Snow & Tabors, 1993). Early proficiency supports academic readiness and enhances children's confidence in multilingual contexts, particularly in Malaysia, where English is often a second or third language.

Storytelling is a pedagogical approach that aligns well with the developmental needs of young children. Through voice modulation, gestures, visuals, and narrative structure, storytelling creates an immersive and interactive learning experience (Isbell et al., 2004). It naturally exposes children to vocabulary, sentence structures, and expressive language while stimulating imagination and attention. Research consistently shows that storytelling enhances phonological awareness, narrative skills, and oral fluency, which are essential foundations for later literacy development (Cooper, Collins, & Saxby, 2019; Wasik & Bond, 2001).

In multilingual preschool settings, storytelling introduces English in a playful and low-pressure manner. Children learn by imitating words, responding to prompts, or retelling parts of the story, activities that strengthen vocabulary use, pronunciation accuracy, and speaking confidence (Ellis & Brewster, 2014). Recent empirical studies further highlight that storytelling supports vocabulary growth, oral fluency, and pronunciation development among preschoolers in multilingual contexts (Purnamasari, Nurhayati & Muthar, 2022; Rohmatul Fawaiz et al., 2022; Saleha, Nirwana & Andani, 2025). These findings indicate that storytelling is not only engaging but also highly effective in promoting early language development.

Given its potential benefits, this study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling in developing English language skills among preschool children. The research focuses on three key areas:

- Vocabulary development
- Pronunciation skills
- Confidence in speaking English

Early childhood is a critical period for language learning. In Malaysian preschools, children come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which increases the need for engaging and meaningful English exposure. Storytelling supports this need by combining verbal expression, visual aids, imagination, and social interaction. During storytelling sessions, children often respond through gestures, repetition, and attempts to imitate new words or phrases, behaviours that contribute to vocabulary expansion, fluency, and expressive competence (Purnamasari, Nurhayati & Muthar, 2022; Rohmatul Fawaiz et al., 2022; Saleha, Nirwana & Andani, 2025).

Classroom observations by the researcher revealed that preschoolers were highly engaged during storytelling activities, especially those involving picture books, puppets, and expressive narration. Children who were initially quiet showed increasing willingness to attempt English words, repeat key phrases, and participate more confidently in group discussions. These observations highlight the potential of storytelling as an effective teaching strategy for supporting English language development in early childhood settings.

Although storytelling is widely acknowledged as a developmentally appropriate approach, its specific impact on English language development among Malaysian preschoolers remains underexplored. Many children begin preschool with limited English exposure, and instructional time is often prioritised for academic tasks rather than interactive oral activities (Zamin, Lotfie & Salleh, 2021; Lim & Hashim, 2024). Research also indicates that vocabulary acquisition and phonological awareness strongly predict later reading success (Cooper, Collins, & Saxby, 2019). However, children with limited English background knowledge may struggle to follow stories without adequate scaffolding, and shy children may hesitate to participate even when opportunities to speak are available (Reynolds & Evans, 2009; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Petersen & Spencer, 2025).

Teachers may face challenges such as managing mixed-language classrooms, limited instructional time, or inconsistent levels of child engagement. Recent studies emphasise that more targeted strategies may be needed to maximise the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing pronunciation and expressive confidence (Harper et al., 2025; Razfar & Rumenapp, 2021). These constraints highlight the importance of examining how storytelling specifically supports English vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking confidence among preschool children (Mustafa et al., 2018; Zamin, Lotfie & Salleh, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by analysing the extent to which storytelling contributes to these key English language outcomes among Malaysian preschoolers.

Literature Review

Storytelling is widely recognised as a developmentally appropriate strategy in early childhood education, combining verbal expression, visual aids, imagination, and social interaction (Isbell et al., 2004; Purnamasari, Nurhayati & Muthar, 2022). Unlike traditional rote teaching methods, storytelling provides children with meaningful and contextualized exposure to language. Through gestures, repetition, and attempts to imitate new words or phrases, children develop language skills naturally in an engaging environment (Rohmatul Fawaiz et al., 2022; Saleha, Nirwana & Andani, 2025). For children with limited English exposure at home, storytelling creates a supportive and enjoyable context for practising oral language, enhancing both comprehension and expressive skills (Fast, 2014; Ghosn, 2002).

Impact on Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical foundation for early English language development. Storytelling exposes children to rich linguistic input in meaningful contexts, allowing them to learn new words and sentence structures organically (Elley, 2019; Dewey, 2003; Wilkinson & Houston-Price, 2013). Mokhtar, Abdul Halim, and Kamarulzaman (2019) observed that storytelling improves reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar, while Soleimani and Akbari (2018) demonstrated significant vocabulary gains among learners engaged in storytelling activities. Similarly, Kalantar and Hashemian (2019) noted that storytelling not

only increases vocabulary knowledge but also enhances learner motivation and engagement, which is particularly important for preschoolers encountering English as a second language. Research indicates that storytelling allows children to process new words through repeated exposure and meaningful use. For example, Kirish (2019) compared storytelling-based instruction with traditional memorization strategies, finding that students in storytelling settings acquired significantly more vocabulary and retained it for longer periods. Collins (2010) also found that when storytelling is paired with parental involvement at home, vocabulary acquisition improves markedly, even among children with initial language delays. This evidence underscores the alignment of storytelling with RO1: Vocabulary development, highlighting its role in both cognitive and linguistic growth.

Impact on Pronunciation Skills

Pronunciation development is another crucial aspect of early language learning that benefits from storytelling. Storytelling provides repeated, authentic oral language exposure, including intonation, rhythm, and stress patterns (Lotta, Tuva, Catja & Par, 2012; Riddersporre, 2014). Through expressive reading, varied voices, gestures, and modeling, educators demonstrate correct pronunciation, enabling children to imitate and practice in a low-pressure, interactive environment (Tuva, 2012; Bruce, 2014).

Moreover, meaning-focused conversations during storytelling link spoken language to real-world contexts, helping children connect written and spoken forms and improving their pronunciation skills (Fast, 2014; Par, 2012). For preschoolers with limited English exposure, these opportunities for guided oral practice are essential, as they provide structured yet enjoyable avenues for learning correct sound patterns and sentence rhythm, directly addressing RO2: Pronunciation skills.

The literature also suggests that storytelling encourages children to experiment with language without fear of making mistakes. By allowing repetition, modeling, and gradual correction in a supportive context, storytelling reduces anxiety associated with speaking a new language, facilitating more accurate and confident pronunciation (Abilock, 2008; Riddersporre, 2014). This shows how pronunciation and confidence are intertwined in early language learning, with storytelling serving as a bridge between comprehension and expressive competence.

Impact on Confidence in Speaking English

Confidence in speaking English is closely linked to opportunities for authentic language use, and storytelling provides such an environment. Preschoolers often feel hesitant or anxious when required to speak in front of peers, especially if they have limited exposure to English at home (Gone, 2002; Lewis Carroll, 2015). Storytelling transforms these classroom dynamics by creating a safe, enjoyable, and structured setting in which children can retell stories, participate in discussions, and experiment with new vocabulary and sentence structures.

Studies show that animated and interactive storytelling increases student motivation, reduces anxiety, and fosters willingness to participate orally (Hemenover, 2022; Miller & Pennycuff, 2018; Cortazzi & Jin, 2019). Samantaray (2018) and Dujmović & Bančić (2019) further emphasize that storytelling transforms otherwise passive learning experiences into dynamic, student-centered interactions, enabling children to develop oral confidence incrementally. Educators scaffold participation through prompts, modeling, and supportive

feedback, ensuring even shy or hesitant learners gain confidence over time (Riddersporre, 2014).

This aligns with RO3: Confidence in speaking English, as storytelling not only provides exposure to language but also empowers children to use it actively in meaningful and socially interactive contexts. By integrating storytelling into daily routines, educators can nurture both linguistic skills and self-efficacy, fostering lifelong confidence in communication.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative observational approach to examine the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing English language skills among preschool children, specifically focusing on vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking. Storytelling was chosen as a developmentally appropriate and engaging instructional strategy that integrates verbal expression, visual aids, imagination, and social interaction, providing children with meaningful contexts to practice new words, imitate language patterns, and develop expressive communication skills (Isbell et al., 2004; Fast, 2014; Phillips, 2021).

Participants were preschool-aged children selected through random sampling to ensure representativeness and diversity within the group. During structured storytelling sessions, researchers systematically observed children's engagement, language use, and participation in oral activities, recording behaviors related to the comprehension and retention of new vocabulary, accurate pronunciation, expressive intonation, and confidence in verbal expression (Roney, 2019; Vilà Giménez, Igalada & Prieto, 2019). Observations also encompassed social and cognitive dimensions, including imaginative expression, narrative comprehension, problem-solving, perspective-taking, cooperative play, and interactive communication, reflecting the holistic impact of storytelling on early language development. By providing a supportive, enjoyable, and low-pressure environment, storytelling encouraged even hesitant learners to participate actively, fostering self-esteem, oral confidence, and willingness to communicate in English (Gone, 2002; Lewis Carroll, 2015; Riddersporre, 2014). Data were collected through detailed observational notes guided by structured criteria aligned with the study's objectives, capturing the frequency and quality of vocabulary use, pronunciation attempts, and verbal interactions during storytelling activities. Thematic analysis was subsequently applied to identify patterns and trends in children's language development, ensuring rigorous interpretation of the data and the credibility of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This methodological approach allowed researchers to evaluate storytelling not only as a medium for introducing and reinforcing vocabulary and pronunciation but also as a tool for enhancing children's confidence, engagement, and active participation in early English learning, highlighting its practical implications for educators seeking to promote comprehensive language development in preschool contexts.

Findings

The findings of the study offer a detailed discussion of the observed effects of storytelling on preschool children's English language development. Data were collected through structured observations using a checklist and supported by insights from the classroom teacher. The study focused on three primary areas: self-esteem, vocabulary development, and

pronunciation skills. Observational data were analyzed qualitatively to explore the extent to which storytelling promotes language acquisition and confidence in English communication.

Socio-Demographic Profile

The study involved 10 children aged five years, comprising six girls and four boys, representing diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Several children were second-language learners, reflecting the relevance of storytelling as a strategy to support multilingual language acquisition. Sociodemographic characteristics provide essential context for understanding differences in engagement, language proficiency, and responsiveness to storytelling activities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ghosn, 2002).

Self-Esteem

Observations revealed that 80% of children actively enjoyed interacting with peers, while 70% successfully integrated into group activities. Eye contact, appropriate body language, and verbal confidence were observed in 50–60% of children. These findings indicate that storytelling creates a safe, structured, and socially supportive environment that fosters self-confidence and peer interaction. Storytelling enables children to practice language in authentic social contexts, enhancing their willingness to communicate despite language barriers (Isbell et al., 2004; Fast, 2014). Additionally, storytelling encourages imaginative play and role-playing, which contribute to self-expression, empathy, and problem-solving skills (Vilà Giménez, Igualada & Prieto, 2019). The structured nature of storytelling, along with repetition and teacher scaffolding, provides children with opportunities to explore communication in a low-pressure setting, gradually improving their self-esteem and communicative competence.

Pronunciation

Regarding pronunciation, 70% of children were able to communicate effectively in English, and 60–70% demonstrated accurate word pronunciation and spoke with confidence. However, only 50% were able to apply appropriate intonation in emotional scenes, indicating the need for explicit modeling of expressive speech by educators. Storytelling allows children to hear words and phrases repeatedly in meaningful contexts, which supports phonological awareness and pronunciation development (Lotta et al., 2012; Riddersporre, 2014). Visual aids, gestures, and props enhance comprehension and provide cues for correct pronunciation (Phillips, 2021). These findings highlight that while storytelling significantly improves basic pronunciation and oral fluency, additional guidance is required for children to master expressive intonation and nuanced speech patterns, especially in second-language learners.

Vocabulary Development

The data indicated that 70–80% of children successfully learned new vocabulary through storytelling. They were able to repeat words, recognize their meanings, and understand simple story themes. Memorization and reading of longer phrases were more challenging, with only 50% able to read or retain extended text accurately. This reflects the cognitive load associated with processing longer sentences and the importance of scaffolding to support reading fluency and retention (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Roney, 2019). Storytelling provides contextualized exposure to new words, linking vocabulary to visual cues, story events, and actions, which enhances comprehension and long-term retention (Soleimani & Akbari, 2018; Kalantar & Hashemian, 2019). These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that

narrative contexts improve both receptive and expressive vocabulary among preschool children (Elley, 2019).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that storytelling is a highly effective pedagogical strategy for early English language development. Children's engagement in storytelling activities facilitated the acquisition of vocabulary, improved pronunciation, and enhanced confidence in speaking. The integration of visual aids, gestures, and interactive elements provides multiple channels of input, supporting comprehension and active participation (Phillips, 2021; Bruner, 2002).

Storytelling also promotes self-esteem and social-emotional development. By participating in collaborative storytelling, children practice communication, negotiation, and turn-taking, which strengthens social skills and peer relationships. This is particularly significant for second-language learners, who often face additional challenges in social communication (Ghosn, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the repeated exposure to vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures in a meaningful context facilitates internalization of language rules, supporting both receptive and expressive skills (Ellis & Brewster, 2014).

The study also underscores the importance of teacher scaffolding and preparation. Educators must be familiar with the material, model expressive speech, and provide adequate visual and contextual support to maximize learning outcomes. Storytelling is most effective when children are actively engaged, emotionally connected to the story, and provided with opportunities to imitate, retell, and discuss content (Isbell et al., 2004; Fast, 2014). Parental involvement further reinforces language acquisition, as children benefit from repeated exposure to stories and vocabulary in home settings (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Despite the overall positive outcomes, challenges remain. Children found longer phrases and reading aloud more difficult, suggesting the need for incremental scaffolding and targeted interventions for literacy development. Intonation for emotional expression also remained an area of difficulty, highlighting the importance of expressive modeling and deliberate practice (Tuva, 2012).

Overall, storytelling provides a comprehensive approach to early language development, integrating cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning. It enhances vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence while fostering engagement, motivation, and social competence. The findings support the implementation of regular storytelling activities in early childhood curricula, demonstrating its potential to create a stimulating and supportive environment for language acquisition. By combining teacher guidance, peer interaction, and parental support, storytelling can serve as a cornerstone for developing foundational English language skills in preschool children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for educators, parents, schools, and future researchers to maximize the effectiveness of storytelling in developing preschool children's English language skills.

Educators

Educators should integrate storytelling into the English language curriculum as a regular instructional strategy. They are encouraged to use a variety of teaching aids, including picture books, puppets, props, and illustrations, to capture children's attention and facilitate comprehension (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Phillips, 2021). Teachers should also model clear pronunciation, expressive intonation, and correct grammar during storytelling sessions, which can help children internalize accurate language patterns (Lotta et al., 2012; Soleimani & Akbari, 2018). Additionally, educators should structure sessions to promote active participation, peer interaction, and confidence-building exercises to enhance children's language and social-emotional development (Bruner, 2002; Isbell et al., 2004).

Modern instructional technology further strengthens storytelling-based instruction by supporting collaborative, learner-centered, and autonomous learning environments (Selvarajoo, Thomeeran, Ghazali & Ganesen, 2024). Tools such as educational blogs, wikis, and discussion forums enable resource sharing and academic communication between teachers and students, enriching the storytelling experience and making learning more interactive and engaging (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Through these digital tools, teachers can gain insights into student performance and adjust their storytelling approaches to better meet individual learning needs.

Parents

Parental involvement in education, which encompasses trust in schools, communication between parents and educators, and both home- and school-based activities, is a multidimensional construct. (Sharim et al., 2024, p. 2884). As part of this involvement, parents play an essential role in supporting early language acquisition through storytelling at home. Reading aloud, discussing story content, and encouraging children to retell stories can reinforce vocabulary development, sentence structure, and comprehension skills (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Roney, 2019).

Parents are encouraged to select books with rich visual content to enhance children's understanding, sequencing abilities, and confidence when narrating stories. Consistent storytelling practices at home strengthen the connection between classroom learning and home experiences, ultimately supporting children's language growth and fostering a positive attitude toward learning English.

Schools

Schools should formally recognize storytelling as a valuable pedagogical tool for developing English language skills, especially for second-language learners. Administrators are encouraged to provide educators with professional development, resources, and structured lesson plans to implement storytelling effectively (Ghosn, 2002; Vilà Giménez, Igualada & Prieto, 2019). Incorporating storytelling sessions into the daily or weekly schedule ensures children have ample opportunities to practice oral language in a structured, meaningful, and enjoyable context.

Future Researchers

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of findings and examine storytelling effectiveness across different linguistic

and cultural backgrounds. Employing mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative language assessments with qualitative observations and interviews can provide a more comprehensive understanding of children's language development (Fast, 2014). Longitudinal studies may also explore the sustained impact of storytelling on vocabulary growth, pronunciation, and speaking confidence. Researchers should communicate clearly with school administrators and educators to ensure smooth collaboration during data collection.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that storytelling is a highly effective strategy for enhancing English language skills in preschool children. Observations showed that children improved in three key areas: vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking. Storytelling engages children in meaningful and interactive learning experiences, allowing them to internalize new words, practice pronunciation, and communicate confidently in English (Soleimani & Akbari, 2018; Phillips, 2021).

Educators play a critical role in facilitating storytelling by modeling language, providing structured guidance, and incorporating appropriate teaching aids, while parents' involvement at home reinforces these skills and fosters a positive learning environment. Schools can further support this process by formally integrating storytelling into the curriculum and providing resources and professional support to teachers.

Ultimately, storytelling serves not only as a language development tool but also as a medium to enhance self-esteem, social skills, creativity, and cognitive development (Bruner, 2002; Isbell et al., 2004). By promoting collaborative efforts among educators, parents, and school administrators, children can gain maximum benefit from storytelling activities, laying a strong foundation for lifelong English language proficiency and overall educational success.

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