



THE IMPACT OF STORYTELLING ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ORAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of storytelling on high school students' oral performance and their attitudes towards this instruction. Using an experimental mixed methods design, pretests, posttests, and interviews were undertaken with thirty six students in the pilot class of academic years 2017-2018. The findings of the study indicate that these participating students were in favor of learning with storytelling rather than other ways. The quantitative analysis reveals that students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, suggesting that storytelling instruction was useful to high school students using the pilot textbooks. Pedagogical implications are also presented.

Keywords: impact, oral performance, storytelling, students

1. Introduction

Research into storytelling indicate that it has an important role in improving students' shared knowledge, communication, and literacy skills (e.g., [Agosto, 2013](#); [Zare-Behtash, Saed, & Sajjadi, 2016](#)). Storytelling therefore is a way to connect students to learn language skills and particularly develop their oral performance in their learning process. Given that storytelling is closely connected with oral performance, this instructional approach can help facilitate student language production and use for the sake of communicative purposes (e.g., [Bygate, 2010](#); [Ellis, 2005](#); [Nguyen & Do, 2017](#); [Thang, 2017](#)). In Vietnam's public education system, to respond to the call for educational reforms, the Ministry of Education and Training launched the National Foreign Languages (NFL) 2020 project targeting at the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages ([Ministry of Education and Training, 2008](#)). This government policy highlights the importance of English at all levels of education to meet the increasing needs of learners ([Do & Nguyen, 2017](#)). In particular, VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized

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Test of English Proficiency) based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is currently applied within the teaching context of English in Vietnam. This test is designed to measure the English language proficiency of students from primary to tertiary education, comprising six levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. High school students are required to obtain B1, the third level of the reference widely accepted as standard for language assessment of individuals' language use and learning. However, high school graduates have usually not reached Level B1 because of their lack of communicative context, shortage of learning motivation and testing pressure. Additionally, tests are mainly focused on written or multiple-choice tests, and thus speaking is almost limited or ignored. Therefore, oral skill is an obstacle preventing them from obtaining B1 level. As a result, storytelling is seen as an alternative technique to tackle this challenge. The current paper provides insights from a study which explores the impact of storytelling on improving oral performance of high school students. The research questions that guided the study reported in this paper were: 'How does storytelling influence high school students' oral performance?' and 'What are high school students' attitudes towards the use of stories in oral performance?'

2. Storytelling

Telling stories is a way that uses words and gestures to convey images of a story to listeners (e.g., [Chancellor & Lee, 2016](#); [Gere, Kozlovich, & Kelin, 2002](#); [Livo & Rietz, 1986](#)). It is therefore an interactive activity of connecting, sharing and interpreting the meaning of words for communicative purposes. Storytelling is universal in that it can bridge cultural, linguistic, and age-related divides. This verbal expression ([Marzuki, Prayogo, & Wahyudi, 2016](#)) allows learners to connect their imagination about a particular matter in a story to communicating ideas in relation to improved language learning, including speaking performance.

As a powerful form of teaching and a way to build communication, storytelling is multidimensional ([Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011](#)) in ways that it encourages students to imagine and gain others' attention to further imagination and construction of new ideas. Storytelling benefits learners in several ways. According to Fawcett and Fawcett (2011), stories can convey great quantities of information in relatively few words to audience, enhance memory, meaning-making process, participation, and action.

Storytelling has been used as a tool for the transmission and sharing of knowledge and values, because it is a natural and yet powerful technique to communicate and exchange knowledge and experiences ([Forest, 2010](#); [Lwin, 2017](#)). Forest (2010) delineates that storytelling can promote students to expand their expressiveness and to enhance their ability to communicate their thoughts and emotions in a clear-cut and lucid way. This view suggests that storytelling functions as a clear communication between people. Storytelling is also a process through which students personalize learning and construct their meaning and knowledge from the stories they hear and tell ([Behmer, 2005](#); [Smeda, Dakich, & Sharda, 2014](#)).

Students' communicative ability through storytelling has gained considerable interest in the literature with regard to teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language (e.g., [Bruner, 1986](#); [Faircloth, 2009](#); [Richards & Renandya, 2002](#)). These authors indicate that this type of instruction provides students with an opportunity to communicate ideas and messages about real-life contexts while learning speaking with a view of improving speaking fluency and interaction with other peers ([Brown, 2007](#); [R. T. Johnson & Johnson, 1985](#)).

According to Farris (1993), storytelling can aid students to voice their ideas and develop their self-confidence while speaking, thereby producing positive attitudes towards such influence. Storytelling therefore offers them a chance to practice and improve communication.

Johnson and Freedman ([2001](#)) assert that engaging students in talking into their lives could form a relationship among students. In that community, storytelling allows students to exercise their imagination, communicate effectively, and think critically. In Mello's ([2001](#)) meta-analysis of the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy, she indicated that participants' literacy was improved with regard to fluency, vocabulary learning, writing, and recall.

Samantaray ([2014](#)) used a similar line of reasoning for use of storytelling to develop technical students' spoken English skills. It was found that storytelling could be an effective method that helps students develop concentration, imagination, participation, comprehension, and English skills.

According to Massa ([2016](#)), storytelling as a strategy helps the second language learners increase oral language because storytelling is a perfect avenue to explore ways to develop the oral skills in class. Through stories, learners are given opportunities to interact with other peers regularly on a one-to-one basis and to talk, think, and explore their knowledge of the topic of interest.

Storytelling is used in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in order to promote speaking skills ([Hwang et al., 2016](#)). Applying individual and interactive storytelling on speaking skills using multimedia aids students in facilitating language learning. Furthermore, in exploring the relationship between speaking performance and interactive storytelling, Hwang and his colleagues found that storytelling can help students improve speaking skills. In particular, students can remember new vocabulary better, practice speaking more frequently, become competent in speaking the target language, and thus improve learning performance.

Although these above-mentioned studies reported positive aspects of storytelling, the existing literature does not particularly consider the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance within the teaching and learning context of English in Vietnam where high school students have limited access to this instruction. This paper therefore provides insights into the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance in EFL high school classes.

3. The study

This research was an experimental study using quantitative and qualitative methods. Thirty six eleventh-grade students at a high school in the Mekong Delta region participated in this study. Their ages range from 17 to 18. They were learning the textbook designed for the-ten-year-English program enacted by Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. They were divided into two groups (control and experimental) with eighteen students in each. Six stories and relevant activities were the main source of material used during the ten-week experiment. A series of six stories was based on the B1 (Level Three) of English language proficiency of VSTEP and contents of the units from *English Textbook 11* published by Vietnam Publishing House. The content of the stories was adapted from the textbook with various topics such as global warming, further education, our world heritage sites, cities, healthy lifestyle and family.

The data collected in this study included tests and interviews. Tests were used to examine the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance. Interviews were conducted to obtain data about students' attitudes towards the use of storytelling. Tests were used to evaluate students' oral performance. As piloting tests can help avoid time-consuming problems in the data collecting process ([Mackey & Gass, 2005](#)), ten students were randomly selected to participate in piloting the pretest and posttest. The Cronbach's alpha for the piloted pretest was .722 and that of the piloted posttest was .753, indicating the high reliability of the tests for collecting the data. The tests were designed following format VSTEP including three parts social interaction, discussion and topic development. However, the tests were adapted to fit with students' English level that corresponds to the English language requirement for high school contexts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students at the twelfth week of the study to gain their attitudes towards the implementation of storytelling that influences their oral performance. Each interview took approximately half an hour.

The pre- and posttest were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. All interview responses were recorded using MP3 recordings, transcribed, and then categorized into themes ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)) for data analysis. Field notes made during the interviews were used to verify the data. The *Descriptive Statistics Test*, *One-Way Anova*, *Independent Samples t-Test*, *Paired Samples t-Test* and *Pearson Correlation* were computed to investigate the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance.

4. Findings

1.1 The impact of using storytelling on students' oral performance

The *Descriptive Statistics Test* was computed to evaluate the students' oral performance of the two groups before and after the study. Table 4.1 shows that the mean score of the students' oral pretest in the experiment group ($M=7.4$, $SD=1.36$) is higher than that in the control group ($M=7.1$, $SD= 1.37$). The result also reveals that the mean score of the

students' oral posttest in the experimental group ($M_{post}=8.5$, $SD=.89$) is higher than that in the control group ($M_{post}=7.7$, $SD=1.27$). Thus, these results indicate that students' oral performance change after the study.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest of two groups

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
pretest (con)	18	5.0	9.5	7.1	1.37
posttest		5.0	9.5	7.7	1.27
pretest (exp)	18	4.5	9.0	7.4	1.36
posttest		7.4	10.0	8.5	.89
Valid N (listwise)	18				

An *Anova One Way* was conducted to evaluate whether there was a difference between the mean scores of students' oral performance in the pretest and posttest in each group. Table 4.2 shows that there is no statistically significant difference of the mean score of students' oral performance in the control group before the study ($df= 10$; $f= 3.542$, $p= .053$). It can be concluded that the initial levels of students' oral performance between two groups are similar.

Table 4: Mean scores of students' oral performance (control group)

Control group (ANOVA)					
Pre-test					
	sum of square	df	mean square	f	sig
between groups	27.003	10	2.700	3.542	.053
within groups	5.337	7	.762		
Total	32.340	17			

However, Table 4.3 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference of the mean scores of students' oral performance in the experimental group after the study ($df= 9$; $f= 3.86$; $p= 0.044$). It can be concluded that after the study, students' oral performance has been improved.

Table 4.3 Mean scores of students' oral performance (experimental group)

Experimental group (ANOVA)					
Pre-test					
	sum of square	df	mean square	f	sig
between groups	21.192	9	2.355	3.860	.044
within groups	4.270	7	.610		
Total	25.462	16			

An *Independent Sample t-Test* was used to check whether there is a difference in students' oral performance between the two groups before the intervention. Table 4.4 illustrates that the mean difference ($MD=-.3167$) is not statistically significant ($t= -.697$, $df= 33.979$, $p=.49$). This result indicates that the initial levels of students' oral performance in the two groups are similar.

Table 4.4: Independent Sample t-Test on pretest

Pretest	t-test for equality of means		
df	sig (2 tailed)	MD	SD
34	.49	-.3167	.4541
33.979	.49	-.3167	.4541

An Independent Sample t-Test was computed to check whether there is a difference between the mean scores of students' speaking posttests in both groups after the intervention of storytelling, as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4: Independent Sample t-Test on posttest

Post-test	t-test for equality of means			
t	df	sig (2 tailed)	Mean difference	Std error difference
-2.181	34	.036	-.80	.3668
-2.181	30.396	.037	-.80	.3668

The results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in students' oral performance in the posttest ($t=-2.18$, $df= 30.396$, $p=.037$). It can be concluded that after the study students' oral performance has been improved.

A Paired Sample t-Test was run to check the mean scores of the five pairs in the experimental group, as shown in Table 4.6. These include fluency (Pair 1), lexical resource (Pair 2), grammatical accuracy (Pair 3), pronunciation (Pair 4) and interactive communication (Pair 5). The results from Table 4.6 indicate how storytelling impacts students' oral performance.

Table 4.6: Paired Samples t- Test in the experimental group

Paired differences	M	SD	Std error Mean	95% confidence interval of the difference		t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	.2444	.3203	.0755	.0851	.4037	3.238	17	.005
Pair 2	.3500	.2526	.0595	.2244	.4756	5.878	17	.000
Pair 3	.0833	.3365	.0793	.0840	.2507	1.051	17	.308
Pair 4	.1278	.4070	.0959	.0746	.3302	1.332	17	.200
Pair 5	.4778	.4360	.1028	.2610	.6946	4.650	17	.000

As can be seen in Table 4.6, after administering Paired Samples t-Test, the test value of fluency (Pair 1) was observed ($t=3.238$, $df=17$, $p=.005$). This indicates that after the study, there is a significant difference in students' fluency. Similarly, the test values of lexical resources ($t=5.878$, $df=17$, $p=.000$) (Pair 2) and interactive communication (Pair 5) ($t=4.65$, $df=17$, $p=.000$) show that there is a significant change in students' lexical resources and interactive communication. It can be concluded that after the study, students have improved their performance in these speaking aspects.

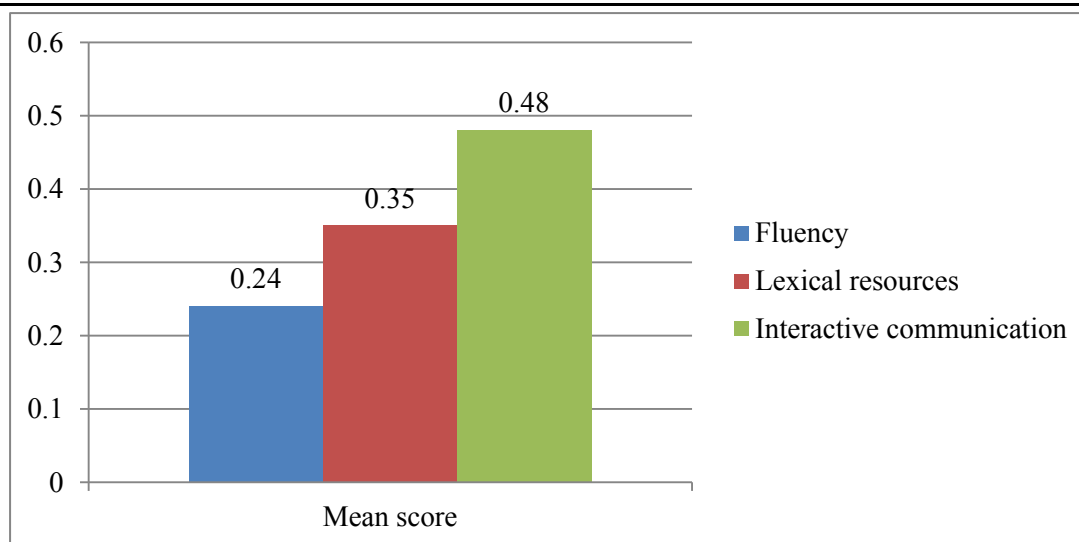


Figure 4.1: Improvements in three speaking aspects

Figure 4.1 illustrates that of the three speaking aspects (fluency, lexical, and interactive communication), the mean score of students' interactive communication ($M=.48$, $SD=.436$) reached the highest, followed by lexical resources ($M=.35$, $SD=.2526$) and fluency ($M=.24$, $SD=.32$). However, as shown in Table 4.6, with regard to grammatical accuracy (Pair 3) ($M=.0833$, $SD=.3365$, $p=.308$) and pronunciation (Pair 4) ($M=.1278$, $SD=.407$, $p=.2$) after the study, no significant difference was observed. It can be concluded that there is no change in students' performance in accuracy and pronunciation.

A *Paired Sample t-Test* was computed to compare the mean scores of the students' oral performance within the pairs of the control group before and after the treatment. Table 4.7 reveals that the mean scores of interactive communication (Pair 5) of students before and after the study are significantly different ($t=2.445$, $df=17$, $p=.026$). In other words, students' interactive communication after the study has been remarkably improved.

Table 4.7: Paired Samples *t*- Test on the control group

Paired differences	M	SD	Std error Mean	95% confidence interval of the difference		t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
				Pair 1	.0667			
Pair 2	.0167	.4315	.1017	-.1979	.2312	.164	17	.872
Pair 3	-.0056	.4633	.1092	-.2360	.2249	-.051	17	.960
Pair 4	.1333	.4229	.0997	-.0770	.3436	1.338	17	.199
Pair 5	.2667	.4627	.1091	.0366	.4968	2.445	17	.026

As a check on the correlation between students' scores in the speaking pretest and posttest, the *Pearson Correlation Test* was computed. Table 4.8 presents a moderate positive correlation between students' speaking performance in the pretest and that in

the posttest ($r=.672, p=.002$). This positive correlation indicates that the students who get high grades in the pretest gain high grades in the posttest.

Table 4: Correlations between pre- and post-tests (experiment group)

		pretest	posttest
Pretest	Pearson correlation	1	.672**
	Sig. (2 tailed)		.002
	N	18	
Posttest	Pearson correlation	.672**	1
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.002	
	N	18	18

** : correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

4.2 Students' attitudes towards the implementation of stories in speaking

The findings from the interviews illustrate that students in the experimental group had positive attitudes towards storytelling. Five themes are identified as newness, preference, feelings, impact and difficulties.

A. Storytelling as a new technique

When asked whether students had ever told a story in their speaking class, all of the eight students revealed that they had never learnt speaking by storytelling and this instruction was new to them. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"This course provided me with an opportunity to tell stories" (Anh, Interview 1)

"It was not until I attended this class, I could tell some stories to my classmates." (Ai, Interview 2)

"I had never told any stories in English speaking class before I learnt this course." (Khoa, Interview 3)

"In this semester, I have talked to my classmates many stories." (Ha, Interview 4)

"In the past, I didn't learn storytelling but this speaking course gives me a chance to tell the stories on class." (Nga, Interview 5)

"It was not until this school year I learnt speaking through storytelling." (Linh, Interview 6)

"There are things I write and tell myself but I had not learnt with storytelling in speaking class before. I have just learnt storytelling this year." (Tuong, Interview 7)

"Thanks to this course, I know how to tell a story in front of my friends through the teacher's guide or prompts of key words" (Nhan, Interview 8)

B. Insights into students' preferences

With regard to preference, six students reported that they preferred the use of storytelling to other ways of learning speaking English.

"I like to learn by telling stories because it's good, new, various." (Anh, Interview 1)

"Of course, storytelling because telling stories helps me interest in learning English and it facilitates to gain knowledge" (Ai, Interview 2)

"I like to look at pictures and tell stories instead of learning something through listening or taking notes." (Ha, Interview 4)

"I like studying with storytelling because it stimulates me to learn." (Nga, Interview 5)

"I love storytelling because it makes me excited. It helps me a lot in learning and how to learn words" (Linh, Interview 6)

"I like storytelling rather than others. Because the traditional way often gives words only limited in the lesson, otherwise when I think about what I think, I learn new words. This is good for me when I can communicate with friends." (Tuong, Interview 7)

"I prefer storytelling because it helps me understand the lesson well." (Nhan, Interview 8)

However, one student reported that he preferred the traditional way of practicing the dialogue or substituting drills first, and then telling a story in front of the class. Khoa shared his view on this traditional way of learning speaking English in his class:

"I like to study speaking through which the teacher uses the traditional way because I find this very much familiar" (Khoa, Interview 3).

Khoa further detailed his teacher's lesson step:

"The teacher provides us with sample conversations and then has us repeat or develop such drills. Sometimes, from several short and simple dialogues with many characters, students play with these roles and practice the dialogues." (Khoa, Interview 3)

C. Feelings of comfortableness, confidence, and interestingness

When asked how students felt while presenting stories to their friends, six students revealed that storytelling was useful as this instruction brought them positive feelings (feeling comfortable, confident, and interested). They stated:

"I am very interested in doing storytelling" (Anh, Interview 1)

"I am very interested in learning speaking with storytelling" (Ai, Interview 2)

"I feel good and confident in front of other classmates. I found no more embarrassed while using a short story to tell others." (Khoa, Interview 3)

"Well, telling a story actually helps me think. Pictures really help me to make up a story, get me involved in speaking up with more ideas" (Ha, Interview 4)

"I feel stories much easier and interesting compared with the traditional way of speaking from learning a dialogue or a conversation by heart. Instead, telling a story can bring us fun and this way makes me comfortable and talkative" (Nga, Interview 5)

"I felt very comfortable and confident in communicating with friends while telling a story to my friends in class." (Nhan, Interview 8)

D. Impact of storytelling on vocabulary and communicative skills

Sharing about the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance in their class, eight participants believed that their oral performance was enhanced in many aspects particularly, vocabulary and communicative skills. They stated:

"I think that telling stories to my classmates increases communicative skills. In particular, the interaction is enhanced because I did not have to memorize the lesson by my heart. In addition, using the gestures help listeners pay more attention to stories" (Tuan Anh, Interview 1)

"Because my classmates tell stories to me and so do I, the communicative skills are increasing, especially the interaction because there is no need to memorize the lesson so I can "eyes contact" with them. I also use gestures to express and make the listener pay more attention" (Ai, Interview 2)

"I am developed in many aspects of speaking such as lexical resource and the strategies of communication, and the most enhancing skill is communicative" (Khoa, Interview 3)

"My English speaking ability increases. I can express ideas quite naturally and flexibly when given a particular situation or role in the story" (Ha, Interview 4)

"I think all of my four English skills are improved now. They are remembering vocabulary, speaking fluency, using grammatical structure, pronunciation. As a result, I could talk and share ideas with my friends." (Nga, Interview 5)

"Sometimes my classmates do not understand the story. However, when I tell them a story or part of a story, I can express what I want to say and practice pronunciation of new words, and this actually allows me to exchange ideas with my classmates to understand the content of the story. New knowledge increases through stories." (Linh, Interview 6)

"I see new words on the pictures and words that I want to use to tell a story. However, I do not know them and I look them up in dictionary. Therefore, my lexical resources increase over time. I understand the speaking lesson better so my vocabulary is better. Since then, I can speak with friends without stopping to think about it. I learn a lot from friends as well while making conversations. New vocabulary, new knowledge from interactions through pair work is very beneficial to me." (Tuong, Interview 7)

"After speaking English by storytelling, my English speaking is more advanced and my vocabulary is also much enhanced." (Nhan, Interview 8)

E. Difficulties in grammatical structures, lexical, and content

With regard to difficulties, eight students reveal that lack of new words, structures and understanding of the story content hindered them from practicing speaking English with friends. The most difficult aspect was grammatical structures they had not known before, followed by lexical and content. They stated,

"I do not have enough words to express what I want to say. Also, structural sentences are real challenge, but then the teacher provided me with these structures in speaking hours" (Anh, Interview 1)

"At first time, vocabulary is not available yet and I do not know how to use the correct sentences to express my ideas about the story, gradually, the sample sentences are taught, simultaneously vocabulary were provided during the speaking lesson" (Ai, Interview 2)

"There are many pictures difficult to understand, I have to use critical thinking to understand the pictures. Well, it is difficult to use the words to express my ideas or understanding for what I want to talk about" (Ha, Interview 4)

"I see new words appear on the pictures. There are words that I want to express but I do not know them and I look up them in dictionary to increase my lexical resources. It trains my oral skills and the ones I have not usually used, I understand better" (Nga, Interview 5)

"There are many new words in the story. These words makes me confused, the structural samples I do not know how to use. It is difficult for me to understand the content" (Linh, Interview 6)

"I had difficulty in finding out vocabulary to talk my part" (Tuong, Interview 7)

"Vocabulary is still difficult for me because I need to have a lot of words to express my ideas related to stories. Thus, I have to think about what words or vocabulary that helps me deal with such challenge." (Nhan, interview 8)

These students' accounts suggest that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical structures were the most challenging aspects that prevent students from telling stories, which could slow down the learning process of their speaking or participation.

5. Discussion

The findings from the research indicate that storytelling has a positive impact on high school students' oral performance. Many aspects of students' speaking were improved such as fluency, lexical resources and interactive communication. Such impact is in line with the findings of several studies in the literature ([Berkowitz, 2011](#); [Farris, 1993](#); [Forest, 2010](#); [H. Johnson & Freedman, 2001](#)). These authors found that involving students in storytelling can improve their communicative skills and shared learning experiences. It is likely that exposing students to telling stories is a potential tool for facilitating and improving students' speaking ability.

The findings reveal that students had positive attitudes towards storytelling including feeling of interest, preference, comfortableness, and confidence. This positive consideration by students has been noted in other studies of the value of storytelling with regard to language learning ([Farris, 1993](#); [Hwang et al., 2016](#); [Mokhtar et al., 2011](#); [Samantaray, 2014](#)). These authors claim that students interested in learning speaking through stories are more likely to actively participate in the learning process as they take responsibility for their own learning. As stories and speaking are closely related, the positive changes in students' attitudes reported in this study suggest that providing opportunities for oral storytelling practice should be an indispensable part of speaking lessons. However, students' lack of vocabulary, insufficient knowledge of grammatical structures, and lack of critical thinking in understanding the story contents were the constraints participating students encountered while implementing stories in speaking classes. Understanding such challenges suggests that teachers should offer students opportunities to voice their ideas through simple to sophisticated text-based stories in their own words in a non-threatening classroom learning experience.

6. Conclusions

The findings provide insightful views of the impact of storytelling on high school students' oral performance and their attitudes towards this instruction. The study may raise teachers' awareness of students' attitudes towards storytelling as well as the challenges while learning speaking, and in particular, give teachers encouragement to

integrate storytelling into their speaking lessons for enhancement of students' oral performance.

The findings also provide some pedagogical implications for school administrators and teachers. It is necessary for school administrators to consider how to support teachers to use storytelling as a potential tool for maximize student speaking learning. Teachers need to employ story-based instructions in their teaching practices to improve many speaking aspects such as fluency, grammar, pronunciation, lexical resources and interactive communication.

Further research with a larger sample size within a longer period of time is needed to offer more views about the impact of storytelling on students' oral performance. If this can be done, for example for more than ten weeks, more topics and activities are to make storytelling work. Storytelling does not only focus on speaking skills. Rather, this instruction can be incorporated into other language skills such as listening, writing, and reading.

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