

Difficulties encountered by teachers in using storytelling to teach very young learners

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is widely applied in second language teaching, especially to Very Young Learners (VYLs), as this teaching technique is believed to be highly effective. However, storytelling application in VYLs classrooms may be challenging since these learners possess unique characteristics in terms of second language acquisition, which might cause a variety of difficulties for teachers. This paper examines the difficulties Vietnam - USA Society English Center's teachers encounter during their storytelling application to teach VYLs. Accordingly, 60 teachers at the language school, who were selected based on their teaching experience, participated in the study. An online survey was carried out in order to find out the participants' opinions on storytelling application challenges regarding the teaching method, the learners' characteristics, and the materials. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve randomly chosen teachers to better understand their rationale and suggestions for those difficulties. For data analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated for questionnaire information while the qualitative responses were transcribed and put into themes. The results revealed that the participants encountered certain challenges while delivering storytelling lessons which mainly stemmed from the students and other subjects namely teachers and materials. The findings from this study may help teachers to mitigate the challenges of the storytelling lesson.

1. Introduction

The application of storytelling appears to be widely used by teachers in the classroom of very young learners. This could be probably explained by the effectiveness that this teaching technique brings to the teaching and learning process which benefits both teachers and learners. Particularly, not only language skills and knowledge can be easily acquired with the help of storytelling but also the aspects of learning attitudes and motivation as well as creativity is enhanced during the lesson.

Regarding very young learners, this type of learner intrigues a great number of researchers (Cameron, 2001; Long, 1990; Nunan, 2011; Shin & Crandall, 2014) as they desire to comprehend how children go through their second language acquisition process. Their characteristics, for instance, are unique in comparison with other types of learners such as teenagers or adults. This factor also results in both advantages and disadvantages in teaching them a second language.

It is undeniable that the role of teachers is of paramount significance in language teaching, especially in the lesson involving preschoolers. Besides the role of imparting knowledge to students, it is their responsibility to create the learning conditions in which students can be exposed to the language at most (Wright & Wright, 1987). These roles are even more emphasized in teaching very young learners as a matter of fact that these students depend greatly on their teachers' guidance. Considering the storytelling lesson in the classroom of very young learners, it is believed that teachers may have to deal with a number of obstacles from distinctive factors.

This small-scale study investigates the difficulties that teachers often encounter in their lesson of storytelling with very young learners. Specifically, the challenges derived from the main three subjects of teachers, learners, and materials are examined. Hence, the two following research questions emerged in the light of the research problem:

- What are the difficulties that teachers encounter in using storytelling to teach very young learners?
- What are the teachers' suggestions for addressing those difficulties?

The results of this paper are expected to provide value considering the understanding of the teachers' challenges with this teaching technique. Specifically, this knowledge of the challenges in storytelling application, particularly at this research site, would be a great resource for the inexperienced teachers here in the stage of previsualization of how storytelling lessons would occur. Additionally, the solutions included in the research are hoped to offer teacher-storytellers useful recommendations for better lessons down the road.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Teaching the second language to very young learners

Very Young Learners (VYLs), as a type of second language learner, are well-defined by different authors in many studies and books. Reilly and Ward (1997) identify these learners aged from approximately 03 - 06 as ones with illiteracy who have not started their schooling yet. Thus, these pre-primary children are, to some extent, all new to the knowledge of their first language and second language. According to Mooney (2000), one of the intriguing characteristics of these children lies in their willingness to acquire new concepts even though their span of concentration is limited in some ways. Sharing the same opinion, Cameron (2001) emphasized their short attention span during the learning process, which causes teachers difficulties in drawing their concentration to the lesson. Reilly and Ward (1997) indicated and added some more unique traits that this type of learner possesses in second language learning. Along with those above characteristics, it is important note for teachers to understand that children, especially the very young ones, may spend a long time taking and consuming the language before the process of language production actually happens. This, according to Reilly and Ward's words, is called "the silent period." Additionally, preschool teaching, the last feature mentioned by the above authors, is supposed to require less pressure and arduousness than other types of students. This brings to the teaching benefits that teachers can repeat their activities during the course without causing students' disinterest. All of the aforementioned characteristics of VYLs, to some extent, offer a clear advantage to second language learning and teaching.

Nevertheless, teaching very young learners, according to different studies and theories, involves various tasks which may somehow become burdensome to teachers. Children tend to create their own learning environment engaging with their immediate settings so as to assist them to become more active in acquiring new knowledge (Piaget, 1970). It is the teachers' responsibility to set up those surroundings in the classroom. In addition, the other factors of learning through

scaffolding and interaction are also significant in constructing the necessary knowledge for students (Vygotsky, 1962). It is suggested by Cameron (2001) that teaching young learners languages is all about learning about how children learn things. In other words, understanding the students' needs is necessary in order to teach them effectively.

2.2. Storytelling teaching and its benefits

Storytelling, in McDrury and Alterio's words (2003), is a "uniquely human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit" (p. 31). The combination of words, actions as well as concepts of the stories makes storytelling a connection among generations (Spaulding, 2011). In accordance with the above authors, Harvey (2013) emphasized the relationship among tellers, listeners, and the story in storytelling in which they support each other in a triangulated way.

In order to give a storytelling lesson effectively, a wide range of consideration should be given to the characteristics of this teaching method. Requesting students to memorize stories may not be effective enough in teaching children (Haven & Ducey, 2007); teachers should divide the stories into scenes and teach them through images with a lot of gestures and body language (Wilkin, 2014). Besides, as mentioned above, teachers should take notice of the learning environment in order to set up useful immediate settings for students' great performance to occur.

The effectiveness of second language development has been shown in a number of research over the years. It is believed that language knowledge and skills can take advantage of storytelling as a great teaching and learning source in students' second language acquisition. Studies conducted by Keshta (2013), Marzuki, Prayogo, and Wahyudi (2016) have shown that this educational technique is an interactive activity in which communication can occur easily through the interpretation of the words in contexts. Additionally, regarding vocabulary and idioms learning, it is also important to signify the benefit of storytelling in delivering them successfully (Asl, 2013; Abdul-Ameer, 2014). Moreover, storytelling is proven to be effective in enhancing students' attitudes and motivation in language learning (Elkılıç & Akca, 2008; Safdarian & Ghyasi, 2013). Last but not least, students can also develop their creativity and imagination in learning by learning with stories (Huffaker, 2005; Kampilis & Berki, 2014; Sneddon, 2008). Overall, this teaching practice is being applied by a variety of teachers as considerable benefits on students' performance are shown in various students over the years.

2.3. Difficulties in applying storytelling in teaching

It is undeniable that every teaching activity has its own drawbacks, and applying it, in reality, can cause ample difficulties which may stem from different factors. In this situation with storytelling, it is the subjects of teachers, students, and materials that can make the lesson with storytelling challenging.

With regards to teachers, they can actually be a problem themselves in creating certain obstacles in storytelling application. They are believed to be the essential bridge to connect the three learning factors of content, learners, and settings (Heimlich & Norland, 1994). Their teaching style, for example, may not fit in with the characteristics of very young learners to some extent (Cameron, 2001). As a result, not all teachers are assigned or willing to take young-learner classes and prefer teaching with teenagers and adults. Furthermore, teachers' teaching approaches to storytelling can contribute to making the lesson whether effective or challenging (Cameron, 2001). As an illustration, when teaching vocabulary using storytelling, it is the teachers' duty to choose among definitional, structural, context-based, and conceptual approaches mentioned by Behlol and Dad (2010).

Very young learners who are still rather self-centered (Reilly & Ward, 1997) can be a source of difficulties in the language teaching process, particularly very young learners. As mentioned above, their uncommon personalities may cause certain challenges during the lesson. The short-term attention span, for instance, results in inattentive attitudes during the lessons or sometimes the neglect of participating in the teaching activities (Reilly & Ward, 1997) and sometimes they take part in the teachers' tasks but do not actually study.

Lastly, challenges may stem from available materials which are being used to teach students. The stories required teachers to teach at each institution may be too dense regarding the context or unauthentic to the real-life language (Cameron, 2001). The shortage of appropriate and intriguing stories in current textbooks may also reduce the opportunities of not only becoming good readers but also exposing them to native speakers' cultures (Bland & Lütge, 2013). In conclusion, certain problems may happen in different stages of storytelling lessons due to diverse reasons. While teachers' teaching style and experience can become a challenge in this kind of lesson, students with their unique characteristics may make it even more demanding. The role of materials should also be considered as its dense contexts, and content appropriateness may be problematic.

In summary, while there is a wide range of studies researching storytelling in language teaching, their focus is mainly on the effectiveness of this teaching method in the subject of second language learners. Thus, the challenges of telling stories, especially when teaching very young children, are not widely investigated in terms of teachers' viewpoints on this teaching technique. In addition, considering the research sites, these English center's teachers' practice and perceptions of storytelling to very young learners can be considered as a research gap that the researcher feels a great need to complete.

3. Methodology

Setting and participants

The participants were sixty teachers at the Vietnam USA Society English Center (VUS) in Ho Chi Minh City. These respondents aged from 20 to 40 included both Vietnamese and foreign teachers who were working at this English center. All of them have had more than two years of comparable experience in teaching very young learners. The students were at the age of 4 to 6 years old and were all new to the language of English. It should be noted that not all teachers are assigned classes for very young children, namely "Smartkids".

The coursebook used to teach this type of young learners at this site was the series "Super Safari", published by Oxford University Press. The storytelling lesson, which is the fifth lesson in each unit of the book, is a compulsory lesson. The stories in this book series are all well-designed with eye-catching pictures and characters. The contents of the provided stories are familiar to students' daily lives, such as friendship, politeness, or respect. Before learning with storytelling, students are equipped with knowledge of vocabulary as well as structures.

Research instruments

This paper involved the instruments of questionnaires and interviews in order to collect thorough data from the respondents. The questionnaire explored the teachers' thinking and opinions of the difficulties that they encountered during the storytelling. Specifically, difficulties arose from subjects of teachers, students, and materials were both inquired, using the 5-point Likert scale. Teachers were asked to show their approval or disapproval of the statements generated from the literature review and the researcher's own knowledge.

In addition, interviews were conducted to deepen understanding of the research problems regarding storytelling challenges as well as to ask for teachers' recommendations. In particular, two main areas were questioned, including what difficulties teachers often have to deal with during the three-stage lesson of storytelling. Along with that, teachers are encouraged to provide their own solutions for addressing the storytelling issues.

Data collection and analysis

The pilot study was conducted with both instruments to examine the validity and reliability of these designed items. After revising the inappropriate items in questionnaires and interviews, the researcher started the data collection for the main study. Firstly, all of the teachers were well-informed and asked for permission to take part in the research. The questionnaire was then delivered to the chosen teachers via the format of Google Forms with the researcher's assurance of keeping data confidential and using it for research purposes only. The interviews were conducted after the completion of the survey. Twelve of the participating teachers, including 06 Vietnamese and 06 foreign teachers, were asked to join the interviews. Each interview lasted about 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the participant's response. These interviews were conducted through the online platform Zoom with teachers' permission to record the audio.

The quantitative data of the questionnaire, it was coded numerically in Excel before being input into SPSS for descriptive analysis. Particularly, a dependent sample t-test was carried out along with the comparison in terms of means, Meanwhile, the data from the interviews were transcribed and coded into common themes with the help of another researcher. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze this type of information in which the researcher counted the frequency of similar ideas.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Teachers' difficulties in using storytelling to teach very young learners

The data analysis was conducted with the help of descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. In particular, the data collected from the questionnaire was summed up and analyzed by SPSS in which comparison was made based on mean score and standard deviation.

From the questionnaire

The questionnaire questioned teachers about the difficulties stemming from the three subjects of teachers, students, and materials. The results included in the following table present the difficulties of storytelling mentioned by sixty participants. Considering the difficulties that arose from teachers themselves, it can be seen that most of them showed positive approval towards the six items in this component. However, their opinions seem to contrast with each other as the standard deviation for these questions is relatively high. For instance, the issue of getting students' attention during the storytelling appeared to receive the most teachers' concerns with regard to the storytelling's challenges (with $M = 3.72$ and $S.D = 1.010$). In addition, the item describing the teachers' giving understandable instructions to learners at this age got the least mean score ($M = 3.35$) along with the highest standard deviation of 1.162. Teachers' teaching style, the appropriate teaching methods, and the way of combining different activities in teaching all received a mean score above 3 ($M = 3.65$, $M = 3.43$, and $M = 3.47$, respectively).

Table 1

Teachers' difficulties in using storytelling to teach very young learners

(Extracted from the researcher's university master's thesis)

Subjects	Difficulties	Mean	S.D
Teachers	Application of appropriate teaching methods	3.43	.998
	Teaching style	3.65	1.022
	Drawing students' attention	3.72	1.010
	Giving understandable instructions	3.35	1.162
	Combination of different teaching activities	3.47	1.065
Students	Limited in concentration	4.00	1.058
	Limited in understanding instructions	3.72	.976
	Limited in lesson engagement	3.75	.950
	Limited in pronunciation ability	3.75	1.139
	Limited in learning through immediate contexts	3.30	1.084
	Lack of interests	3.67	1.002
Materials	Lack of stories supplements	3.8	1.086
	Lack of appropriate stories	3.52	1.112

In terms of students as the cause of the lesson challenges, students' attention during the storytelling application reached the highest mean score at 4 despite showing a high S.D of 1.058. It is also noticeable that the learners' engagement with the stories and their accurate pronunciation during the lesson shared the same number of mean scores at 3.75. While the idea of students' instruction understanding and their interests in learning got positive agreements ($M = 3.72$ and $M = 3.67$ respectively), the participants tend to show neutral opinions regarding the issue of learning through immediate contexts ($M = 3.30$). The standard deviation for most items remained quite high, presenting the huge differences among teachers' answers. Last but not least, materials issues were raised in the last two questions, and despite reaching high in S.D, both items received teachers' agreements for causing difficulties with the storytelling application.

From the interviews

The collected qualitative data were coded into several similar common themes after being counted for the frequencies and percentages of the same ideas. Following the structure of the questionnaire in which teachers were asked to give their thoughts on the storytelling difficulties stemming from teachers, students, and materials, the data deepened the participants' thinking on the research issues.

Regarding the factor of teachers, five out of twelve teachers, accounting for 42%, reported that they have had trouble searching for the right way to teach stories to this type of learner. "I think it might be me not having the right tool for them. Currently, I'm using the videos, PowerPoint where I cut up the videos and add subtitles, and so on. But still, it doesn't live up to my expectations of how it should go." illustrated by a Vietnamese teacher. This was followed by the challenge of delivering the moral lesson in each story with 25 percent of respondents' ideas. Meanwhile, the

same number of participants expressed their concern on the issues of keeping positive energy as well as getting students attentive throughout the lesson. As reported by another Vietnamese teacher about this, “*with storytelling, I think it does require the teachers to have a lot of energy and emotions to kind of draw the students in*”.

Additionally, students’ concentration received the most concern from the teachers in terms of being a factor causing difficulties during the lesson. This was, surprisingly, in line with the data from the questionnaire. The other ideas, such as students’ willingness to take part in the activities and their negative attitudes toward the lesson, achieved 25% and 17%, respectively. This was illustrated by a foreign teacher’s statement that “*Sometimes you can plan the lesson very well but then the students don’t get it. Or you have an odd student in the class, and it’s difficult for them to sit still or be interested in what you do. Your students might not engage in the lesson that you plan.*” Lastly, materials seem to obtain the least teachers’ opinions for causing challenging lessons. 12% of participants thought the contexts in several stories are too dense to effectively deliver, which “*can be a burden to young teachers or inexperienced teachers because not all of them have skills to be able to simplify or enhance or add more to it to overcome the challenges*”.

Table 2

Teachers’ difficulties with storytelling application

(Extracted from the researcher’s university master’s thesis)

Subjects	Problems	Total frequencies	Percentages
Teachers	Don’t know the right way to teach	5	42%
	Always be active, energetic	2	17%
	Get students’ attention	2	17%
	Explain the value	3	25%
Students	Short attention span	8	67%
	Don’t join activities	3	25%
	Too hyperactive or be bored	2	17%
Materials	The context is too dense	3	12%
	The story is too long or too short	1	8%
	The words are hard to explain	1	8%
	The story is not interesting	1	8%

4.1.2. Solutions for addressing the challenges

It is also noticeable that the interviewees recommended several useful suggestions for addressing the given problems with storytelling. Three categories could be identified through their responses, including teaching styles, teaching resources, and teaching techniques. For example, it is suggested that teachers can take advantage of their own weaknesses to compensate for their weaknesses. Considering the teaching resources, having the knowledge of how the students’ mindset works may benefit teachers in teaching them. Another technique suggested by a foreign teacher is to make a lot of predictions when planning the lesson. As suggested by an expat teacher, “*a lot of problems can be overcome if you make your predictions. You need to know your own*

students. You need to know how their mind works and how certain things can distract their learning. Being strict with them doesn't always work. Raising your voice with them doesn't always work. You have to be friends with them." With regard to the teaching techniques for better storytelling application, a variety of ideas were given by these experienced teachers. Gestures and body language, for example, should be included in this type of lesson in order to draw students' attention at most. Being interactive with short and simple tasks can make students feel at ease and become willingly join the teachers' activities. This is asserted by a foreign teacher, *"I try to use body language and use English so that they kind of, you know, associate with the words rather than Vietnamese."* However, the use of Vietnamese at the right time can be advantageous to the students as they can consolidate what they just learned as well as comprehend the moral lesson properly. For example, according to a Vietnamese teacher, *"sometimes, when I want to deliver the value of the story like the lesson they should learn after the story. So, I have to ask my TA to help me to model or to translate into their mother tongue to help students with the main ideas of the lesson."* It is also recommended that a combination of different teaching techniques will work effectively in the class of very young learners.

4.2. Discussion

The results from this study support several previous research about storytelling applications (Dujmović & Bančić, 2014; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Le, 2020; Soltani, Khalaji, & Azizmalayeri, 2015) and present several interesting ideas about the storytelling practice. In general, it can be observed that difficulties mentioned in the questionnaire were well noticed by most respondents with high mean scores, while their ideas in the interviews were deepened with proper explanations. It also appears that students are considered the main reason causing certain difficulties in this lesson, along with factors of teachers themselves and the materials.

Considering the obstacle of picking the right methods to teach this type of learner, it reasserted the significant role of teachers mentioned by Heimlich and Norland (1994) in the class of very young learners that they are the connection among different subjects of storytellers, listeners, and the stories. Provided that storytellers know how to properly deliver the content of the stories with appropriate teaching techniques, the student-listener can be deeply engaged in not only the language but also the value behind those stories. This was aligned with what Kirsch (2012) found in her research about storytelling application in teaching vocabulary and claimed that young children in the study showed positive learning attitudes and better engagement through the help of teachers' effective teaching strategies. As a result, the teachers' difficulties in finding the appropriate teaching method to deliver the storytelling lesson or the proper and understandable instructions to these preschoolers should be carefully considered. Furthermore, adding to the difficulties teachers might experience with storytelling, these experienced teachers also mentioned the teaching styles as a teaching obstacle which supported the idea of Cameron (2001). This could be due to the fact that different storytellers might possess distinctive teaching styles which might or might not fit in with students' characteristics.

In addition, the very young learners' characteristics, especially the short attention mentioned by Reilly and Ward (1997), are the participants' main concern in teaching them. This is reasonable to comprehend as this will result in the inattentive learning attitudes of these very young children. It is undeniable that students at this age do not prefer staying in their seats doing repetitive activities in one lesson. Thus, the challenges coming from this subject are varied and can only be addressed through teachers' own experiences. Furthermore, the shortage of supplements for provided stories can also be a huge problem in storytelling applications. This supports Bland and Lütge (2013) that this causes difficulties for not only the teachers in combining

various tasks in their teaching but also the students in having more chances to better understand the stories.

With regard to the teachers' suggestions, three categories of suggestions mentioned by the participants were also supported by previous theories and studies. For instance, the recommendation of using as many gestures and body language as possible when telling stories is well noticed by Linse (2005) that students can learn best when they are actively involved in the lesson, just like the way they learn their mother tongue. Some teachers at this site also recommended the use of constant interaction between teachers and students or among students during the lesson, which can work well as an effective method in getting these learners to the lesson. Additionally, based on the difficulties investigated in this study, I would like to provide personalized suggestions for future storytelling practice. Firstly, from the main challenges derived from very young learners, it was suggested that teachers should attempt to provide as many interactive activities as they can in order to draw students' attention at most during the lesson. For the difficulties coming from the teachers themselves, peer observations would be useful for them in order to visualize how this type of lesson would occur in reality as well as prepare themselves for addressing similar obstacles that might happen in their class. lastly, the materials and dense context of the stories were advised to simplify by teachers first while waiting for further revision from institutions.

In conclusion, several challenges such as the student's characteristics and the nature of storytelling practice mentioned by these informants appear to be aligned with the literature in terms of theories and practice. Additionally, from the qualitative data, there are also some present-day ideas about other difficulties reasons namely the teachers' teaching style or the contexts of the stories. Suggestions from the teachers through the interviews appear to be practical and sensible for both teachers and material writers to take into account when teaching and creating educational stories.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

This paper set out to examine the difficulties encountered by teachers in using stories to teach very young learners, along with suggestions for addressing the challenges. The results indicated the teachers' opinions of difficulties stemming from teachers, students, and materials. The students tend to be the main factor causing challenges in this type of lesson as they possess unique characteristics in language learning while teachers and materials indirectly contribute to the lesson obstacles. It is also noticeable that the participants involved provided rich insights considering how to address the challenges of storytelling. The findings can be used to mitigate the difficulties for teachers' better performances in the future.

One of the study's limitations lies in the small sample size, which is not enough to make generalizations about different teaching and learning sites. It is also suggested by the researcher for further study that a deeper understanding of storytelling effectiveness on particular language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, or writing can be explored.

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