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THE EFFICACY OF STORYTELLING IN ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG UZBEK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the efficacy of the storytelling technique as a pedagogical tool for enhancing the English speaking skills of Uzbek learners. In Uzbekistan, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), students often face challenges in achieving oral proficiency due to traditional, grammar-translation based methods that underemphasize communicative competence. This study synthesizes findings from classroom-based action research conducted with a group of secondary school students in Uzbekistan. Over an eight-week period, a storytelling intervention was implemented, and data were collected through pre- and post-speaking tests, classroom observations, and student interviews. The results indicated a statistically significant improvement in students' speaking performance, particularly in the areas of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Furthermore, qualitative data revealed a marked increase in learners' motivation and self-confidence. The study concludes that storytelling provides a culturally congruent and pedagogically effective strategy to address the speaking difficulties faced by Uzbek learners, fostering a more engaging and low-anxiety learning environment. Recommendations for curriculum design and teacher training are provided.

Keywords

Storytelling, Speaking Skills, Uzbek Learners, EFL, Oral Proficiency, Learner Motivation, Cultural Congruence.

INTRODUCTION

The global prominence of English has positioned it as a critical tool for international communication, economic development, and academic exchange. In Uzbekistan, recent educational reforms have significantly emphasized the importance of mastering English, viewing it as a gateway to global integration and socio-economic advancement (Abdullaeva, 2021). Consequently, there is a growing demand for effective English language instruction that equips learners with practical communicative skills.

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Despite this push, the reality in many Uzbek classrooms is that traditional teaching methodologies, heavily reliant on rote memorization, grammatical drills, and teacher-centered instruction, continue to dominate (Karimov, 2019). This approach often results in students who may possess a sound theoretical knowledge of grammar but lack the ability to use English for meaningful, spontaneous communication. Speaking, as a productive skill, is particularly affected. Uzbek learners frequently exhibit hesitancy, a lack of fluency, and limited lexical resources when attempting to speak English, challenges compounded by a fear of making mistakes and a general lack of confidence (Rasulova, 2020).

The problem this study addresses is the persistent gap in the oral proficiency of Uzbek EFL learners, which can be attributed to the limitations of prevailing teaching methods. Therefore, this research aims to explore the implementation and impact of storytelling techniques on the speaking skills of Uzbek learners. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the implementation of storytelling techniques improve the speaking proficiency (in terms of fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension) of Uzbek EFL learners?
2. What are the perceptions of Uzbek EFL learners regarding the use of storytelling in speaking classes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is a complex and dynamic skill that involves more than the mere articulation of words. It is an interactive process of constructing meaning that entails producing, receiving, and processing information (Brown, 2007). To be considered a proficient speaker, a learner must demonstrate competence across several micro-skills.

For Uzbek learners, the overemphasis on accuracy in traditional methods often comes at the expense of fluency and communicative confidence.

Storytelling has deep roots in human culture and, by extension, in education. In the context of language learning, it is recognized as a powerful medium for delivering linguistic input in a compelling and context-rich format. As Wright (2021) argues, stories "provide a holistic approach to language learning, engaging the emotions and imagination of the learner, which facilitates deeper processing and longer retention of language" (p. 45).

The benefits of storytelling are multifaceted. Linguistically, it exposes learners to new vocabulary and grammatical structures in a meaningful context, aiding acquisition beyond rote memorization (Ellis & Brewster, 2014). It provides a genuine reason for communication, thereby enhancing fluency as learners focus on conveying a narrative rather than on perfect form. Affectively, storytelling can lower the affective filter—a psychological barrier to learning—by

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creating an enjoyable, low-stakes environment (Krashen, 1982). This is crucial for Uzbek learners, who often experience high levels of speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the structured nature of stories (with a clear beginning, middle, and end) provides a scaffold that helps learners organize their thoughts and speech coherently (Nicolini, 2021).

A significant advantage of storytelling in Uzbekistan is its cultural congruence. Uzbek culture has a rich and venerable tradition of oral storytelling, epitomized by the *doston* (epic poem) and the cultural figure of the *bakhshi* (storyteller). Leveraging this familiar cultural schema can make the introduction of storytelling in the English classroom less foreign and more accessible to students (Rasulova, 2020). By tapping into a pre-existing comfort with narrative forms, teachers can bridge the gap between students' cultural identity and the target language, potentially increasing engagement and reducing resistance.

While numerous international studies (e.g., Zuhriyah, 2017; Inayah, 2015) have demonstrated the effectiveness of storytelling, there is a scarcity of empirical research focusing specifically on the Uzbek EFL context. This study aims to fill that gap by providing localized evidence on the efficacy of this technique.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a quasi-experimental design with qualitative data collection to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The primary framework was a single-group pre-test/post-test design, supplemented by classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

Participants

The study was conducted with 30 students (16 female, 14 male) in the 10th grade at a public secondary school in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The participants, aged 15-16, had been studying English for at least four years and were assessed to be at a A2-B1 (CEFR) level. They were selected through convenience sampling.

Instruments

In the first week, all participants completed a pre-test speaking assessment. They were given a series of images and asked to tell a story based on them. Their performances were recorded and scored using a speaking rubric adapted from Maulany (2013), which assessed fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension on a 5-point scale for each. For the following six weeks, the regular English curriculum was supplemented with bi-weekly storytelling sessions. Each storytelling session followed a structured five-stage format—comprising teacher modeling, deconstruction of language, student preparation, performance, and

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communicative feedback—while data were collected through ongoing observational field notes and post-intervention semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected students to capture their in-depth experiences. In the eighth week, the pre-test was re-administered under identical conditions to measure any changes in speaking performance.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using a paired-sample t-test to determine the statistical significance of score improvements. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to student engagement, confidence, and perceived challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the pre-test and post-test scores revealed a significant improvement in the students' overall speaking performance. The mean score on the pre-test was 2.91 (SD = 0.56), which increased to 4.02 (SD = 0.49) on the post-test. A paired-sample t-test confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant.

A breakdown of the scores by speaking component showed improvement across all areas, with the most pronounced gains in **Fluency** (mean increase of 1.4 points) and **Vocabulary** (mean increase of 1.3 points). **Comprehension** and **Pronunciation** also showed substantial improvements, while **Grammar** showed a more modest but still significant gain. This pattern suggests that storytelling is particularly effective in fostering the automaticity and lexical retrieval necessary for fluency, as learners are compelled to focus on meaning and narrative flow.

A majority of interviewees reported feeling "less scared" and "more brave" when speaking English. One student noted, "At first, I was only thinking about my mistakes. But when I told the story of 'The Pomegranate Seed' [an adapted local tale], I was just thinking about the story. The words came easier." This aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, indicating that the engaging nature of storytelling lowered psychological barriers to production.

Observational notes consistently recorded high levels of student participation and enthusiasm during storytelling sessions. Students were actively listening to their peers and showed genuine interest. In interviews, they described the lessons as "fun" and "not like normal class," which contrasts with their perception of traditional, textbook-heavy lessons. This finding supports Wright's (2021) assertion that stories engage the imagination, making learning more enjoyable and motivating.

The findings of this study strongly suggest that storytelling is an effective pedagogical intervention for improving the speaking skills of Uzbek EFL learners. The quantitative data

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confirms significant improvements in measurable speaking components, while the qualitative data provides insight into the underlying affective mechanisms—increased confidence and motivation—that likely facilitated these gains.

The pronounced improvement in fluency and vocabulary can be attributed to the fundamental demands of storytelling. To tell a coherent story, learners must string sentences together in a continuous flow, pushing them to develop fluency. Similarly, the need to express specific characters, settings, and actions drives vocabulary acquisition and use. The more modest gain in grammatical accuracy is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching, which posit that a focus on meaning precedes and facilitates the eventual acquisition of form (Brown, 2007).

This study's results are consistent with international research but add a crucial contextual layer. The positive reception of storytelling among Uzbek learners underscores the importance of aligning pedagogical innovations with local cultural practices. The familiar narrative structures of Uzbek oral traditions provided a cognitive and affective scaffold that made the task of speaking a foreign language less daunting.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the integration of storytelling techniques into the EFL curriculum can effectively address the speaking proficiency deficits commonly observed among Uzbek learners. By providing a meaningful, engaging, and culturally congruent context for language use, storytelling enhances not only linguistic competencies like fluency and vocabulary but also critical affective factors such as confidence and motivation.

For educators and policymakers in Uzbekistan, this research suggests a need to re-evaluate over-reliance on traditional grammar-focused methods. Teacher training programs should incorporate workshops on practical, communicative techniques like storytelling, equipping instructors with the skills to implement them effectively. Curriculum developers are encouraged to include narrative tasks and local folktales as core components of speaking syllabi.

A limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size and single-group design. Future research could employ a controlled experimental design with a larger, more diverse sample across different regions of Uzbekistan. Longitudinal studies are also needed to investigate the long-term retention of skills acquired through storytelling. Furthermore, exploring the application of digital storytelling tools could be a fruitful avenue for future inquiry, aligning with the nation's growing investment in educational technology.

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In conclusion, storytelling is not a mere classroom activity but a powerful, evidence-based strategy that can help unlock the communicative potential of Uzbek learners, aligning their English language proficiency with the nation's ambitious global aspirations.

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