

THE USE OF CONTEXTUALIZED STORYTELLING TO ENHANCE MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS' READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

This study was an attempt to compare the use of contextualized storytelling with the text with picture stimulus approach and the text only approach to enhance Year 5 pupils' reading comprehension. The study was carried out in a public co-educational school in Penang, Malaysia. A quasi experimental research design was used with 90 Year 5 pupils. The pupils were placed into three equal groups of 30 participants each, according to their school First Term Assessment results. Two short stories were used and two comprehension tests were developed to evaluate pupils' comprehension of the short stories. Comprehension test scores were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially. The results indicated that the pupils who participated in contextualized storytelling performed significantly better than those in the other two groups in reading comprehension. There was no significant difference between the scores from the text with picture stimulus approach and the scores from the text only approach. The findings of the study have implications for the teaching of reading comprehension especially in the Malaysian primary school context.

Keywords: contextualized storytelling, ESL, reading comprehension, primary school

Introduction

Reading short stories is a meaningful and fun activity among primary school pupils. However reading a short story in a second language context may prove challenging. Approaches that apply in a first language may not work with ESL learners who are not proficient in English as a second language.

Most learners comprehend the stories written in their mother tongue quite easily because they are used to the language system and the way linguistic items are combined and arranged. They are equipped with the knowledge of the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical devices that help the reader process a text effectively. The stories are also most likely set within a familiar cultural setting. For example, in the Malaysian context many kids grow up with the legendary mousedeer known as *Sang Kancil*. Stories about *Sang Kancil* happen in a tropical rainforest and carry moral values appreciated by Malaysians. For a Malaysian whose mother tongue is *Bahasa Malaysia*, reading a *Sang Kancil* story written in *Bahasa Malaysia* is understandably easier. Native speakers are able to use their knowledge acquired through their experience of learning and using their mother tongue to aid comprehension. In contrast, to the ESL learner, stories written in English not only have an unfamiliar language but also might contain strange creatures like badgers and beavers. A limited knowledge of both setting and language makes comprehension difficult.

Malaysian ESL students are still in the process of acquiring the knowledge and experience of the language which is privy to native speakers. Explicit training in guessing and using contextual and other clues to meaning seems necessary to make input more comprehensible. In addition teachers entrusted with the task of teaching reading comprehension and encouraging the reading of short stories among young ESL learners constantly have to find approaches that work in this specific context. Teachers may find that they cannot use only words to achieve reading comprehension. In fact, instruction can be incomprehensible even when pupils know all of the words. Effective reading instruction has to go beyond the choice of vocabulary to the presentation of background and context, explanation and rewording of unclear content, and the use of effective techniques such as using contextual or visual cues.

The challenges faced by young ESL learners in the comprehension of short stories have led to the introduction of many teaching approaches in this area. This paper reports part of a study to compare three approaches, namely, contextualized storytelling, using text with picture stimulus and using text only, in enhancing the reading comprehension of 11 year-old pupils.

The focus of this article is on answering the following two research questions and the accompanying hypothesis for the second research question.

RQ1 How do participants in each of the three groups using three different approaches perform in the reading comprehension tests?

RQ2 Are there any statistical significant differences between the reading comprehension test scores of the three groups using three different approaches?

The null hypothesis for RQ2 is: There are no significant differences between the reading comprehension test scores of the three groups using three different approaches.

Literature Review

Storytelling holds an appeal for the young as well as the old in diverse cultures in the world. For many, the word Storytelling evokes a picture of an enthralled audience drinking in every word and following every action of the storyteller as they are taken on a journey of fantasy and imagination. The engaged listeners sometimes reciprocate with words and actions, as invited by the storyteller. In the contemporary scene, storytellers such as Andrew Wright, based in Hungary, and Jan Blake who specialises in stories from Africa and the Caribbean, stand out.

There are many ways of looking at storytelling. According to the National Storytelling Network (n.d.) storytelling is an art form marked by five important components, as practised in the United States and Canada. Firstly storytelling is an interactive process between the storyteller and listener. Secondly words make up the story and thus there is the use of language in the process. Thirdly actions are included. These could be nonverbal body language, vocalization and movements. Fourthly storytelling has a story to tell and finally, storytelling stimulates the listeners' imagination. The definition by the National Storytelling Network neatly captures the essence of storytelling which is echoed by many (see Gere, 2002; Kozlovich, 2002; Mello, 2001; Meyer & Bogdan, 2001).

To elaborate further, Nessel (1985) notes that a storyteller normally focuses on keeping the listeners actively involved and feel very much a part of the story as it unfolds. Then, the storyteller and listeners will jointly create meaning and bring the story to life. In this way storytelling is consistent with constructivist learning. Besides, the whole storytelling atmosphere helps develop listening comprehension skills leading to reading comprehension. Books and articles that guide ESL teachers to conduct English storytelling in their classrooms are increasing in number as more and more teachers attempt to integrate this approach in their practice (Ellis, 2002). A growing number of discussions and studies have been conducted to look at the plausibility of storytelling in ESL classrooms.

Research has shown that storytelling is an effective way of teaching English to ESL learners. In a preliminary research, Walker (2001) found that children appeared to

be paying more attention when they were told stories. Walker conducted his study in the US to compare the effects of three different media: story reading, storytelling, and story presented on a CD-ROM. Those students who heard the story told achieved the highest story comprehension scores. There are also studies that show the positive effect of storytelling aloud on reading comprehension of elementary EFL students (see Nasser Saleh Al-Mansour & Ra'ed Abdulgader Al-Shorman, 2011; Mohammad Ali Kowsary & Yasman Rauhani, 2013).

Cary (1998) proposes the use of contextualized storytelling to bring out the strength of storytelling in enhancing English Language acquisition, especially among ESL learners. The story teller not only uses words but also body language and visual props to contextualize the story. These aids help the learners to understand the story told without resorting to their mother tongue. The combination of verbal and nonverbal communication seems to be an effective storytelling approach. Cary's (1998) study found positive effects of the contextualized storytelling approach on ESL learners' comprehension, a higher degree of pupil engagement and improvement in speaking. Huang (2006) conducted an experiment to test the effect of contextualized storytelling on reading comprehension among Taiwanese young readers. The multi-sensory contextualized storytelling approach was compared with the single sensory input approach (text with images) and the no sensory input approach (text only). In this EFL context, it was found that contextualized storytelling outperformed the other two approaches in overall reading comprehension.

As mentioned above aids such as pictures can contribute to better comprehension. It has been proven that pictures could help students to comprehend and remember texts. Paivio's dual-code hypothesis (1971) states that one remembers better with both verbal memory and image memory. Paivio (1971), of the University of Western Ontario, who has done a great deal of research on memory, states that if we commit facts and ideas to memory through words only, we are utilizing our brainpower only partially. Verbal memory is processed by one part of our brain while image memory is processed by another part of the brain. When verbal (language) input is combined with non-verbal (pictures) input, the power of cognition increases. Thus the dual-code hypothesis postulates that when a story is presented with both verbal and visual information, comprehension is enhanced. In addition pictures can bring images of the real world into the formal language classroom other than help develop pupils' listening comprehension (Zhang, 2010).

Pictures can be easy to prepare and organize, interesting, meaningful and authentic. Research also indicates that teaching pupils how to effectively use pictures and photographs that accompany texts can enrich the reading experiences of reluctant

and low ability readers. With guidance on their use, poor readers can refer to pictures as a tool to comprehend the text being read (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003).

In sum, when pupils face linguistic deficiency and background knowledge, they will find it hard to comprehend a text and they need more new teaching approaches. Storytelling and using picture stimulus are some methods to help young English speaking learners progress from listening comprehension to reading comprehension. Even reading a storybook aloud, a simple version of storytelling, can greatly affect children's learning (Troustle & Hicks, 1998).

It is also important to note that storytelling belongs to the perspective of whole language education whose advantages in language literacy teaching and learning have been recognised. Weaver (1996) has given a review of studies that compare whole language education and the traditional classroom in early education. Among the positive effects among children in whole language classrooms are greater ability in the use of phonics and development in vocabulary, spelling, grammar and punctuation skills. These children not only read and write better but also exhibit independence, persistence and engagement in literacy activities. To add to the literature, the present study investigated the effect of storytelling which is a whole language approach, on the comprehension of the short stories read, measured using written tests.

Research Design

This is a quantitative study that seeks to compare the effects of three approaches to reading short stories on pupil's performance in reading comprehension. It has a quasi-experimental design involving three groups of pupils. All the three groups are experimental groups in that they each received a different approach used to enhance reading comprehension. The three approaches are reading the text only, reading the text with picture stimulus and reading the text after listening to the story told by the teacher (the contextualized storytelling approach).

This study was carried out in a co-educational urban primary school in Penang. It is a fully government aided school with only Malay pupils. The pupils come from mainly families in the lower and middle income groups. Most of the parents work as prison wardens, hospital workers and laborers. They live in the nearby government quarters and housing areas. At the time of the study, there were 425 pupils studying in this school (from Year 1 to Year 6).

Ninety Year 5 pupils were selected for the study using the criterion that they were those who needed help in learning the language, specifically in improving their

reading and listening skills. The sample of these 90 pupils was of special interest to the researcher (the second author) as they had been with her for the past two years and she was aware of most of their weaknesses and learning problems in ESL. The researcher was keen to expose them to new techniques that would hopefully facilitate their learning, especially in the area of reading comprehension. All the 90 pupils were placed into the three classes of equal number according to their grades in the school First Term Assessment as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Number of pupils in each group

Pupils' Grades	Group A	Group B	Group C
Grade A	7	8	7
Grade B	12	10	11
Grade C	8	7	8
Grade D	3	5	4
TOTAL	30	30	30

Research Instruments

Two stories, *Beauty and The Beast* and *The Frog Prince* (Tan, 2001) were chosen as the reading texts for several reasons. First, the stories are well-illustrated with pictures, but readers still need to read the text in order to get the complete message. Second, there is a consistent writing style in both stories with similar characters and settings. Third, the reading level and length of the stories, about 400 words in each story, which have been controlled for target readers of 11 years old, might be challenging but manageable for the pupils of the present study. Besides, the stories share a common theme. The plots are about princes cursed by a spell which is finally broken by kindness and love. The stories were selected by a panel of four people, namely, two English teachers from two different schools (one teacher had been teaching English for 25 years and the other had been teaching English for 21 years), the researcher (the second author) and a headmistress in another school who had been teaching English for 28 years.

Two comprehension tests were developed, one test for each story, to evaluate the pupils' comprehension. In each test there are fifteen multiple choice questions (MCQs) and ten true/false questions. Each question is worth one mark, giving a full score of 25. Since these tests were self-designed, reliability and validity issues had to be addressed. Content validity of each test was determined by two teachers. Both teachers had at least 20 years of teaching experience at the primary school level. They checked that the questions were of the level of the pupils, of the types familiar

to the pupils and covered the contents of the two stories. A pilot study to determine the reliability of the test was conducted at a primary school in the same location. A randomly chosen Year 5 class of 30 pupils from the research population took part in the pilot study. The results of the pilot study are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Cronbach's Alpha value of the Comprehension Tests

	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha For all the items
Story 1 Comprehension Test (<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>)	.882	.935
Story 2 Comprehension Test (<i>The Frog Prince</i>)	.818	

The items in the two sets of scores show high positive correlations and the Alpha value is 0.935 indicating high reliability. The administration as well as results of the pilot study helped to confirm all the test items and maintain the time allocation of 25 minutes for the full duration of the test for the actual study.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the three equal groups experienced a different approach each. As summarized in Table 3 Experimental group A read the text only, without pictures or storytelling. Experimental group B read the text with pictures. Experimental group C went through contextualized storytelling. They listened to the story before reading the text without pictures.

Table 3
Three approaches

Groups	Text only	Text with picture stimulus	Text with contextualized Storytelling
A (N=30)	x		
B (N=30)		x	
C (N=30)			x

To avoid biasness, two other colleagues were engaged to conduct the lessons. Teacher One taught Groups A and B while Teacher Two who was familiar with the contextualized storytelling approach was the storyteller for Group C. Teacher Two also assisted in creating the visual aids for the storytelling session. She did not read the story as written. Instead she told the story with her own words as well as some words from the text, supported by visual props and the appropriate body language. All the lessons for the three groups were conducted during school hours with the permission of the headmistress.

Each group took 3 lessons (3 x 30 minutes) to cover Story 1 on *Beauty and the Beast*. Participants in Group A were guided by their teacher in reading the text only without any illustrations or storytelling. Participants in Group B were guided to read the text with illustrations. Participants in Group C first listened to the story as told by the storyteller and then read the text without illustrations. During the test, the participants were given 15 minutes to read the story in each case, another 25 minutes to answer the MCQs and true/false questions. The test scores of the pupils were recorded. After a week, in another three lessons, the three groups went through the same procedures with Story 2 on *The Frog Prince*. All test scores were keyed into SPSS to run the statistical tests.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1

How do participants in each of the three groups using three different approaches perform in the reading comprehension tests?

To answer this question the average of two tests was computed and compared across the three groups. The results are as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Reading comprehension scores

	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
text only	30	18.37	3.30	.60	17.13	19.60	11.0	23.0
text with picture stimulus	30	18.20	3.07	.56	17.05	19.35	11.5	23.0
text with contextualized storytelling	30	21.55	2.35	.43	20.67	22.43	16.5	25.0

The data show the overall means of reading comprehension test scores for the text only approach and text with picture stimulus approach are 18.37 and 18.20 respectively. The mean for the text with contextualized storytelling approach was the highest at 21.55. The results revealed that the pupils who experienced the approach of contextualized storytelling did better in reading comprehension compared to the other two groups.

Research Question 2

Are there any statistical significant differences between the reading comprehension test scores of the three groups using three different approaches? The null hypothesis is: There are no significant differences between the reading comprehension test scores of the three groups using three different approaches.

To answer research question 2, the scores of both the reading comprehension tests for the three different approaches were analyzed statistically using ANOVA. The results are as given in Table 5 below.

Table 5
Comparison of means of the three approaches

text only (N=30)		text with picture stimulus (N=30)		text with contextualized storytelling (N=30)		F	Sig
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
18.37	3.30	18.20	3.07	21.55	2.35	12.43	.000

Table 5 shows that the *p* value is less than the confidence level of .05. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. In other words, there are significant differences in the reading comprehension performance between the three approaches. Subsequently the Tukey HSD test was used to determine which relationships showed a significant difference. The analysis is shown in Table 6.

Table 6
The Tukey HSD test results

Treatment Group	Mean	Mean Difference	Sig.
text with contextualized storytelling	21.55		
text only	18.37	3.18	0.00
text with contextualized storytelling	21.55		
text with picture stimulus	18.20	3.35	0.00
text only	18.37		
text with picture stimulus	18.20	0.17	0.97

Significant at a confidence level of 0.05

At a confidence level of .05 the analysis using the Tukey HSD test, shows a significant difference in the means between the text only and text with contextualized storytelling approaches and the means between the text with picture stimulus and text with contextualized storytelling approaches. The text with contextualized storytelling approach yielded the highest mean score. No significant

difference was found in the means between the text only and the text with picture stimulus approaches.

The results confirmed the researchers' belief that contextualized storytelling is beneficial to reading comprehension and a worthy pedagogical approach. The results are also consistent with the findings of Huang (2006) as given earlier. Brand (2001) recommended that language be learnt by use rather than by systematic study. The findings here agree with this view that storytelling which emphasizes the process of a two-way communication between the storyteller and the listeners has indeed helped the Year 5 pupils to fare better in their reading comprehension. Contextualized storytelling presents the contents of a reading text in an enjoyable way that makes the listeners lower their affective filter, thus allowing more language uptake. The use of nonverbal communication also helps to sustain both engagement and motivation during the storytelling session.

The text with picture stimulus group did not perform as well as the text with contextualized storytelling group. Neither did it perform significantly better than the text only group. This is contrary to findings by Wang (cited in Huang, 2006), which showed that text-relevant illustrations helped Taiwanese middle-school students comprehend better and recall more than just reading a text. A probable reason for this could be that pupils were not aware that the pictures in the text could aid understanding of the story. The pupils were so used to answering questions related to texts that come without illustrations in examination genres. So, although pictures were there to give them some kind of guidance and help in understanding the text, these pictures were by and large ignored. In order for pictures to have a positive impact on comprehension, teachers will need to interest pupils to interact with the pictures as part of understanding the narrative as well as guide them on the use of these pictures (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003).

Conclusion

This study has shown that contextualized storytelling was the most superior approach in enhancing reading comprehension among Year 5 ESL pupils when compared with the text only and text with picture stimulus approaches. There was no significant difference in mean scores between the text only group and the text with picture stimulus group. These two approaches are close to the normal practice in which the pupils read texts that are either embedded with some pictures or most of the time without any illustrations at all. The emphasis is more on the individual's own interaction with the text. However the use of pictures to aid comprehension should be further investigated as the results of the present study did not show its advantage as seen in Wang (cited in Huang, 2006).

The auditory and nonverbal input inherent in contextualized storytelling might be considered as the merits of this approach, which dramatically presented the content and increased the appeal of the story. The pupils' affective filter was noticeably lowered in a conducive interactive storytelling environment. During the storytelling session the pupils' multiple senses were stimulated to not only receive more language input but also remain engaged, leading to better comprehension.

The findings of this study point to the need for a more teacher-active role in ESL reading, especially in the primary school context. The teacher's story interpretation through contextualized storytelling could result in perceptible benefits in young learners' reading comprehension. Teachers are thus encouraged to incorporate storytelling in the reading class. Any teacher with an acceptable command of the language can tell stories in English. Storytelling should not be seen as a chore but an activity which appeals to the imagination and allows experimentation with the target language. Teachers could cultivate the development of pupils' language skills by providing opportunities to play with words, with the story, and with the text during storytelling.

Storytelling is also great for extended activities. After listening to a story the pupils can be encouraged to retell it, reenact it, or suggest alternative endings. This can be achieved by the teacher through the use of effective questioning techniques. When the teacher embraces the pupils' own versions expressed in any form, be it orally, pictorially, acted out or written down, the pupils will grow in confidence as a language user. Although this study concentrated on Year 5 pupils, the findings may be applied to pupils of all levels of primary schooling in Malaysia to improve not only their reading comprehension but also their interest in reading and in other subjects.

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