

Storytelling-Based Instruction and Oral Linguistic Performance among ESL Learners: Evidence from a Quasi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

Storytelling can give second-language learners a reason to produce connected speech rather than responding only to individual questions or isolated sentences. However, less is known about its effect on different aspects of oral linguistic performance when these aspects are examined together. This study examined the effect of storytelling-based instruction on the oral performance of higher-education ESL learners using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design. Sixty-five learners participated in the study, with 36 in the experimental group and 29 in the control group, based on their baseline speaking performance. The experimental group received five weeks of storytelling-based instruction, whereas the control group continued with regular classroom instruction. Oral performance was assessed before and after the intervention in five areas: sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Classroom observations and research-diary records were also used to provide contextual information about learner development. Across the five areas assessed, the experimental group recorded greater improvement than the control group. After baseline performance was taken into account, the between-group differences were statistically significant for sentence flow, $F(1, 62) = 18.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$; spontaneity, $F(1, 62) = 16.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$; pauses and fillers, $F(1, 62) = 14.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$; confidence and expressiveness, $F(1, 62) = 20.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$; and vocabulary use, $F(1, 62) = 12.67, p = .001, \eta^2 = .17$. The results suggest that a structured storytelling approach can create useful opportunities for sustained oral production and may support several aspects of learners' speaking performance when narrative work is combined with guided classroom practice.

Keywords: storytelling-based instruction, oral linguistic performance, ESL learners, speaking performance, fluency, vocabulary, quasi-experimental study

1. Introduction

Speaking in a second language is not simply a matter of knowing enough vocabulary or remembering grammatical rules. Learners have to decide what to say, find the words they need, build sentences while speaking, and keep the message moving. They also have to deal with pauses and moments when the language they want is not immediately available. These demands become more noticeable when learners are expected to speak at length rather than provide short answers (Fulcher, 2003; Kormos, 2006; Luoma, 2004).

The classroom does not always provide enough space for this kind of speaking. When oral work is mainly organised around teacher questions, controlled practice, or short responses, learners may have limited opportunities to sustain their own speech. Accuracy remains important, but speaking also requires learners to manage language while communicating meaning. Repeated opportunities to produce language can therefore matter for the development of oral ability (Ellis, 2003; Luoma, 2004). Research on second-language fluency likewise points to the role of processing and repeated performance in helping learners produce speech with greater continuity and

control (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Segalowitz, 2010).

Storytelling offers one way of creating such opportunities. When learners tell or retell a story, they already have something to communicate. They have to remember what happened, decide how events are connected, retrieve vocabulary, and turn those ideas into spoken language. Unlike a series of unrelated speaking prompts, a story gives the learner a thread to follow.

This may be one reason storytelling has attracted attention in language teaching. Its value is not necessarily that it makes speaking lessons more enjoyable, although that may sometimes happen. More importantly, the narrative gives learners a structure within which they can produce connected speech. Bruner (1986, 1990) views narrative as a way of organising experience and constructing meaning. In a language-learning setting, that organisation can give learners a communicative purpose for producing language. Storytelling has also been associated with contextualised vocabulary learning and meaningful language use (Kirsch, 2016).

Previous research has examined storytelling and narrative-based activities in relation to several areas of second- and foreign-language learning. These include vocabulary development, speaking proficiency, learner engagement, and willingness to communicate (Akram et al., 2025; Gutierrez Arvizu, 2020; Huang, 2023; Kirsch, 2016; Robin, 2008). Huang (2023), for instance, reported positive effects of digital storytelling on English speaking proficiency and willingness to communicate. Akram et al. (2025) found benefits related to vocabulary development, while Gutierrez Arvizu (2020) and Kirsch (2016) highlight the role of narrative and contextualised exposure in vocabulary learning. Yao et al. (2025), in a recent synthesis of oral narrative interventions, also reported positive effects across L2 learning outcomes and noted that intervention characteristics and learner proficiency may influence the outcomes.

These findings make storytelling a relevant area for further investigation, but they also leave an important question open. Speaking is not one

single ability. A learner may have enough vocabulary to express an idea but hesitate repeatedly. Another learner may speak continuously but use a narrow range of words. Someone else may have the linguistic resources needed to speak but show little confidence or expressiveness. An overall speaking score can conceal these differences.

The present study therefore looks at oral performance through five areas: sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use. Taken together, these areas capture some of the different demands learners face when speaking. Sentence flow concerns the continuity of spoken language. Spontaneity relates to how readily learners produce speech without excessive dependence on preparation. Pauses and fillers reflect aspects of speech management, particularly when learners need time to plan or retrieve language. Confidence and expressiveness concern how learners present their message, while vocabulary use reflects their ability to select and use words during oral production.

Swain's (1985, 2005) Output Hypothesis provides one useful explanation for why storytelling may support this kind of development. Producing language requires learners to formulate messages and draw on the linguistic resources they have available. In trying to say what they mean, they may also become aware of what they cannot yet express easily. Storytelling creates repeated opportunities for this process because learners have to turn a sequence of events into spoken language rather than simply recognise language produced by someone else.

Task repetition provides another useful perspective. Bygate (2001) and Bygate et al. (2001) suggest that repeating an oral task can influence aspects of fluency and control as learners become more familiar with the demands of the task. The first attempt at telling a story may require considerable attention to the content and sequence of events. A later attempt can be different because the learner already knows the story and can devote more attention to language production. The potential benefit, then, may come

partly from having another opportunity to perform the same kind of communicative work.

Looking at these studies together reveals a less explored question. Much of the existing research has concentrated on particular outcomes such as vocabulary, general speaking proficiency, motivation, engagement, or willingness to communicate. Fewer studies have examined several observable aspects of oral linguistic performance within the same storytelling-based intervention. There is also a need for stronger comparisons between storytelling-based instruction and regular classroom instruction, particularly when learners begin with different levels of speaking ability.

The present study addresses this issue through a quasi-experimental comparison of two groups. Sixty-five higher-education ESL learners participated, with 36 learners in the experimental group and 29 in the control group. The groups were classified according to baseline speaking performance. Over five weeks, the experimental group participated in storytelling-based instruction, while the control group continued with regular classroom instruction. Learners completed speaking tasks before and after the intervention, and their performance was assessed using a researcher-developed analytic rubric covering the five dimensions.

The study therefore asks not only whether learners improved after storytelling-based instruction, but also whether their post-test performance differed from that of learners who continued with regular classroom instruction after baseline performance was taken into account. Classroom observations and research-diary records were also used to provide contextual information about learner development during the intervention.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does storytelling-based instruction improve the oral linguistic performance of ESL learners?
2. Is there a difference in post-test oral linguistic performance between learners who receive storytelling-based instruction and those who

receive regular classroom instruction after accounting for baseline performance?

3. How do sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use differ between the storytelling-based instruction and regular classroom instruction groups after accounting for baseline performance?

The study contributes to research on storytelling-based language pedagogy by examining oral performance through several related dimensions rather than relying only on a single overall speaking score. It also provides a comparison between storytelling-based and regular classroom instruction in a higher-education ESL setting. The intention is not to present storytelling as a solution to every difficulty in speaking. Rather, the study examines whether giving learners a narrative to work with, together with repeated opportunities to produce oral language, is associated with measurable changes in different aspects of their speaking performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Storytelling and Second-Language Learning

Storytelling has a particular place in language learning because a story gives learners something to organise and communicate. Events have to be put into some order, participants need to be introduced, and relationships between actions have to be made clear. In this sense, storytelling involves language use as well as the organisation of meaning. Bruner (1986, 1990) describes narrative as a fundamental way of organising experience and constructing meaning. In a language classroom, that structure can give learners a reason to produce connected language instead of responding to unrelated prompts.

Research has examined storytelling in several areas of second- and foreign-language learning. Kirsch (2016) found that storytelling can support vocabulary learning by placing lexical items in meaningful contexts. Gutierrez Arvizu (2020) also examined vocabulary acquisition through narrative-based instruction, while Akram et al. (2025) reported vocabulary-related benefits in an ESL classroom. The focus has not been limited to vocabulary. Huang (2023) examined digital

storytelling in relation to English speaking proficiency and willingness to communicate, and Reid and Clark (2026) reported effects related to vocabulary and motivation. More recently, Yao et al. (2025) brought together findings from oral narrative interventions and reported positive effects across several L2 learning outcomes.

The literature therefore gives storytelling a fairly broad pedagogical role. At the same time, the outcomes being examined differ considerably from one study to another. Some studies focus on vocabulary, others on speaking or learner-related outcomes. This variation makes it difficult to say exactly which aspects of oral performance may benefit when storytelling is used as a sustained classroom activity.

2.2. Storytelling and Oral Linguistic Performance

Speaking involves several processes happening at once. Learners need to organise ideas, retrieve words, formulate utterances, and continue speaking while dealing with the pressure of real-time production (Fulcher, 2003; Luoma, 2004; McNamara, 1996). Fluency is therefore not simply a matter of speaking quickly. It also involves how speech is produced and managed as communication unfolds (Segalowitz, 2010).

This makes storytelling relevant to the study of oral performance. When learners tell a story, they cannot focus on vocabulary or grammar alone. They have to remember the sequence of events, decide what information to include, select words, construct utterances, and keep the story understandable to the listener. The narrative gives them an organisational frame, but the language still has to be produced by the learner.

De Jong and Perfetti (2011) found that structured fluency practice can contribute to development in second-language oral production. Their findings are relevant here because storytelling also involves sustained oral production rather than isolated responses. The connection, however, is not that storytelling and fluency practice are identical. Rather, both create conditions in which learners repeatedly have to manage language while speaking.

Task repetition provides another way of understanding this relationship. Bygate (2001) and

Bygate et al. (2001) found that repeated performance of communicative tasks can influence aspects of oral production as learners become more familiar with task demands. Skehan (1998) similarly argues that task design affects how learners distribute their attentional and processing resources. For storytelling, this means that a second or later attempt may not require the same amount of attention to the basic organisation of the task. Some of that attention can instead be directed towards language production.

2.3. Vocabulary and Expressive Dimensions of Oral Performance

Vocabulary is closely tied to speaking because learners need words readily available if they are to express ideas without repeatedly stopping to search for them (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Limited lexical resources can make oral production more difficult and may contribute to hesitation. Storytelling can help in this respect because vocabulary is encountered as part of an event or situation rather than as a disconnected list of items (Kirsch, 2016; Gutierrez Arvizu, 2020).

There is also an expressive side to storytelling that is relevant to oral performance. A story involves people, actions, reactions, and sometimes changes in emotion. Learners therefore have something to convey through their delivery, not just information to reproduce. Huang (2023) found positive effects of digital storytelling in relation to speaking proficiency and willingness to communicate, while Reid and Clark (2026) also considered motivational outcomes associated with storytelling.

These findings should be interpreted carefully in relation to the present study. Confidence and expressiveness are included here as observable features of oral performance, not as direct measures of learners' psychological confidence. The distinction matters. A learner may appear more willing to speak, use more expressive delivery, or sustain speech more readily during a task, but such behaviour does not by itself establish a change in underlying self-confidence.

The present study therefore treats vocabulary use, confidence and expressiveness, sentence flow, spontaneity, and pauses and fillers as observable dimensions of oral linguistic performance.

Examining them together allows the study to consider speaking as a broader performance rather than reducing it to vocabulary or fluency alone.

2.4. Repeated Narrative Production and Language Output

The potential value of repeated storytelling can be considered through Swain's (1985, 2005) Output Hypothesis. Producing language requires learners to turn intended meanings into actual linguistic forms. In doing so, they may notice that they do not have the words or structures needed to express an idea as they want. Output can therefore make learners more aware of gaps between what they want to communicate and what they can currently produce.

Storytelling creates a natural setting for this kind of output. Learners have to turn events and ideas into connected speech, and repeated storytelling gives them more than one opportunity to do so. The second attempt may involve different processing demands from the first because the learner is already familiar with the content.

This connects with the work of Bygate (2001) and Bygate et al. (2001) on task repetition. Repeating a communicative task can allow learners to become less occupied with the demands of organising the task and to devote more attention to how they express their message. Skehan (1998) similarly highlights the influence of task structure on learners' allocation of attention during performance.

The important point is that repetition does not necessarily mean asking learners to tell exactly the same story again and again. Related stories, retelling activities, changes in perspective, or gradually reduced support may also provide opportunities for learners to produce language with increasing independence. The effectiveness of storytelling may therefore depend partly on how the activities are sequenced and how much support is provided at different stages.

2.5. Research Gap

The existing literature provides reasonable evidence that storytelling can support different aspects of second-language learning, particularly

vocabulary, speaking, engagement, motivation, and willingness to communicate (Akram et al., 2025; Huang, 2023; Kirsch, 2016; Reid & Clark, 2026; Yao et al., 2025). What remains less clear is how several dimensions of oral performance develop within the same storytelling-based intervention.

Much of the previous work has selected one main outcome. Vocabulary studies, for example, tell us about lexical development, while studies of speaking proficiency provide broader evidence of oral improvement. Learner-related studies address motivation or willingness to communicate. These findings are valuable, but they do not necessarily show what happens to the different observable features of learners' speech.

A second issue concerns the setting and form of storytelling. Digital storytelling has received considerable attention, but classroom storytelling does not always depend on digital technology. There is still value in examining what happens when storytelling is organised as a regular classroom practice, particularly among higher-education ESL learners who are expected to communicate with increasing independence.

A third issue is the need for comparison. Evidence that learners improve after a storytelling intervention is useful, but it does not by itself tell us whether similar improvement might have occurred through regular classroom instruction. A quasi-experimental comparison can provide a stronger basis for interpreting the contribution of the storytelling approach.

The present study responds to these issues by examining a five-week storytelling-based intervention with higher-education ESL learners. Oral linguistic performance is considered across sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use. An experimental group receiving storytelling-based instruction is compared with a control group receiving regular classroom instruction, with baseline speaking performance taken into account in the analysis.

The focus, therefore, is not simply on whether storytelling makes learners better speakers. It is on what changes in their oral performance and

whether those changes differ from what is observed under regular classroom instruction. This provides a more detailed basis for considering the potential contribution of structured storytelling to ESL speaking development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a non-equivalent control group. It involved two classroom conditions. One group received the storytelling-based programme, while the other continued with regular classroom instruction.

The learners were not randomly assigned. Their initial speaking scores were used to form the two groups. This was important because the groups did not begin at the same level, and that difference had to be considered when the posttest results were examined.

The design was:

Experimental group: $O_1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow O_2$

Control group: $O_3 \rightarrow C \rightarrow O_4$

O_1 and O_3 refer to the pretest, X to the storytelling intervention, C to regular classroom instruction, and O_2 and O_4 to the posttest.

3.2 Participants and Group Allocation

The participants were 65 ESL learners enrolled in higher-education programmes. They were selected through purposive sampling because they were accessible to the researcher and met the requirements of the study.

Before the intervention, each learner completed a speaking assessment. The total score could range from 5 to 15 and covered five areas: sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use.

The first assessment provided the learners' starting scores. It also determined their group allocation. Learners scoring 5–10 were placed in the experimental group, giving a total of 36 learners. Those scoring 11–15 formed the control group, with 29 learners.

Table 1

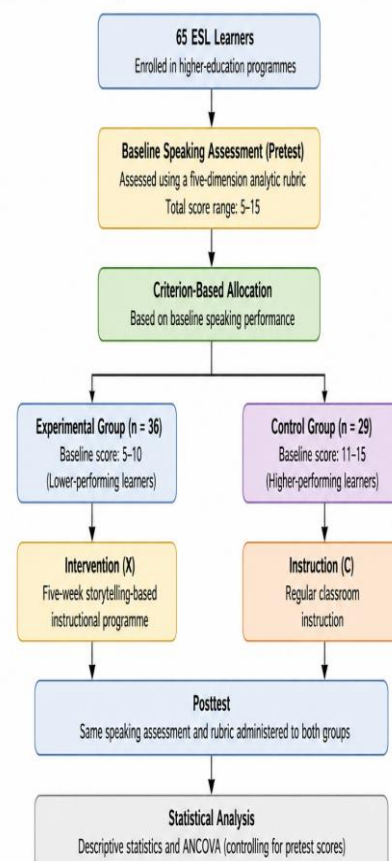
Participant Distribution by Group

Group	Baseline score	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Experimental	5–10	36	55.4%
Control	11–15	29	44.6%
Total	—	65	100%

The baseline scores were retained for the later analysis because the two groups were not created through random assignment.

Figure 1 presents the movement of participants from the initial speaking assessment to group allocation, the instructional period, and the posttest.

Figure 1. Study Design and Participant Flow



After group allocation, the experimental group entered the storytelling programme and the control group remained under regular classroom instruction. Both groups were assessed again at the end of the five-week period.

3.3 Storytelling-Based Instructional Intervention

The storytelling programme ran for **five weeks**. The activities began with considerable guidance and gradually gave learners more freedom to organise and deliver their own stories.

Table 2

Five-Week Storytelling-Based Instructional Programme

Week	Focus	Activities
1	Narrative organisation	Story frames, event sequencing, guided retelling
2	Supported speaking	Picture-based narratives, semi-controlled storytelling
3	Spontaneous speaking	Instant storytelling, role-play
4	Extended speaking	Longer narratives, expressive storytelling
5	Consolidation	Integrated storytelling, mock posttest tasks

In the first week, learners worked with story frames and sequencing activities before moving into guided retelling. Pictures and semi-controlled narratives were used in Week 2. During the third week, learners had less preparation time and worked with instant storytelling and role-play. The fourth week involved longer narratives and more attention to delivery. In the final week, the earlier activities were brought together and learners practised tasks similar to the posttest.

The support was reduced as the programme continued. The control group followed its regular classroom instruction throughout these five weeks.

3.4 Assessment of Oral Linguistic Performance

A researcher-developed analytic speaking rubric was used to assess oral performance. It covered five dimensions:

1. Sentence flow
2. Spontaneity

3. Pauses and fillers
4. Confidence and expressiveness
5. Vocabulary use

Each area received a score from 1 to 3, producing a total score between 5 and 15.

For the speaking assessment, learners received one common narrative prompt and spoke for 90 seconds. The same general task and scoring framework were used at both assessment points.

The rubric focused on what could be observed while learners were speaking. Sentence flow concerned how continuously and clearly the speech developed. Spontaneity reflected the learner's ability to produce speech without depending heavily on preparation. Pauses and fillers captured hesitation during speaking. Confidence and expressiveness concerned delivery, while vocabulary use reflected the learner's choice and use of words.

Here, confidence and expressiveness referred to observable delivery, not to learners' psychological confidence. The study did not use the speaking rubric as a separate measure of self-confidence.

3.5 Pretest and Posttest Procedure

The pretest took place before the five-week programme began. Each learner completed the 90-second narrative task under the same general assessment conditions. The resulting scores were used for the initial assessment and group allocation.

The experimental group then received the storytelling intervention. The control group continued with regular classroom instruction.

At the end of the five weeks, both groups completed the speaking assessment again. The same general task format and scoring framework were retained at posttest.

During the intervention, the researcher also kept classroom observation notes and research-diary entries. These records captured changes noticed during the teaching period, particularly in learner participation and oral performance. They were later used to add context to the quantitative findings.

3.6 Data Analysis

The pretest and posttest scores were first summarised using means and standard deviations. Changes in individual performance were examined through gain scores:

Gain score = Posttest score – Pretest score

The main comparison focused on posttest performance. Since the groups began with different baseline scores, those initial scores were taken into account through analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

For each ANCOVA, posttest score was the dependent variable, instructional group was the grouping factor, and the corresponding pretest score was the covariate. The analysis was carried out for the overall oral linguistic performance score and for each of the five dimensions.

The size of the observed group difference was reported using partial eta squared (η^2). Statistical significance was set at the .05 level.

The classroom observations and research-diary entries were read alongside the statistical results. They were used to help interpret what was happening during the intervention, rather than as a separate statistical test.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, learners were briefed about the study and the activities involved. The study followed the applicable institutional requirements.

Participant names were not used in the research records. Identification codes were used instead to maintain confidentiality.

The speaking assessments were audio-recorded for research purposes. The recordings were used for assessment and analysis of oral linguistic performance.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Pretest–Posttest Performance

The two groups did not start at the same level. The experimental group's pretest mean was 8.83, compared with 12.45 for the control group. At

posttest, the corresponding means were 10.92 and 13.62.

Table 3

Overall Pretest–Posttest Oral Linguistic Performance by Group

Group	N	Pretest M	Posttest M	Mean Gain
Experimental	36	8.83	10.92	2.09
Control	29	12.45	13.62	1.17

The experimental group gained 2.09 points, whereas the control group gained 1.17 points. The difference between the gains was 0.92 points.

The raw scores need to be read with the starting difference in mind. The control group had the higher pretest mean, so the posttest means alone do not provide a fair basis for comparing the two instructional conditions. The adjusted comparison is reported below.

4.2 Dimension-Wise Oral Linguistic Performance

The overall score was broken down into the five dimensions to see whether the pattern was similar across different aspects of speaking.

Table 4

Dimension-Wise Changes and Inferential Results

Dimension	Experiment al Change	Contr ol Chang e	Inferenti al Result	Effec t Size (η^2)
Sentence flow	+1.82	+0.54	$F(1, 62) = 18.74, p < .001$	
Spontaneity	+1.67	+0.47	$F(1, 62) = 16.52, p < .001$	
Pauses and fillers	+1.58	+0.39	$F(1, 62) = 14.86, p < .001$	
Confidence and expressiveness	+1.91	+0.61	$F(1, 62) = 20.31, p < .001$	

Dimension	Experimental Change	Control Change	Inferential Result	Effect Size (η^2)
Vocabulary use	+1.46	+0.42	$F(1, 62) = 12.67, p = .001$	.17

The five dimensions followed much the same pattern. The experimental group's largest gain was in confidence and expressiveness (+1.91), followed by sentence flow (+1.82) and spontaneity (+1.67). Gains in pauses and fillers and vocabulary use were 1.58 and 1.46 points.

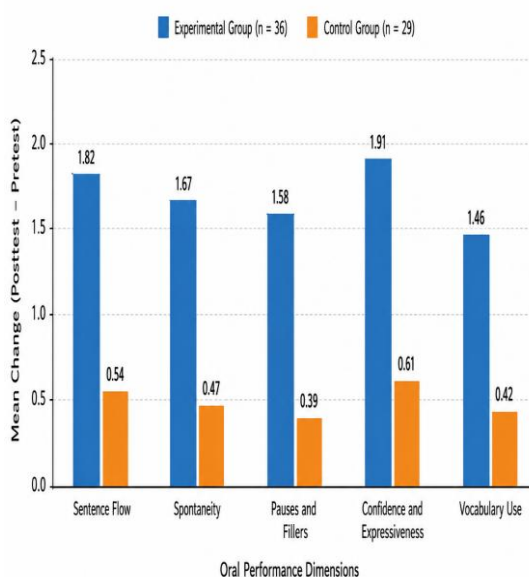
The control group showed smaller changes, with gains between 0.39 and 0.61 points.

After adjustment for the pretest scores, the group differences were significant for all five dimensions. The corresponding effect sizes ranged from .17 to .25. Confidence and expressiveness had the largest effect ($\eta^2 = .25$), while vocabulary use had the smallest ($\eta^2 = .17$).

Figure 2

Mean Change across the Five Dimensions of Oral Linguistic Performance

Figure 2. Pretest-Posttest Changes Across Five Oral Performance Dimensions



Note. Values represent mean change scores (posttest minus pretest). Higher positive scores indicate greater improvement.

The figure provides a visual comparison of the changes. The experimental group increased more

than the control group on each of the five dimensions.

4.3 ANCOVA Results for Overall Oral Linguistic Performance

The difference in starting scores made an adjusted comparison necessary. The overall posttest scores were therefore analysed using ANCOVA, with pretest performance entered as the covariate.

Table 5

ANCOVA of Overall Posttest Oral Linguistic Performance

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial η^2
Pretest score (Covariate)	18.462	1	18.462	36.924	< .001	.373
Group	8.214	1	8.214	16.428	< .001	.210
Error	31.000	62	0.500	—	—	—
Corrected Total	57.676	64	—	—	—	—

The pretest score was significantly related to posttest performance, $F(1, 62) = 36.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$. The group effect was also significant, $F(1, 62) = 16.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$.

Thus, the difference between the groups remained significant even after the initial difference in speaking performance had been taken into account. These results provide the basis for the interpretation developed in the Discussion.

5. Discussion

The results point to a difference between the two instructional conditions. Learners who took part in the storytelling programme made a larger overall gain than those who continued with regular classroom instruction. More importantly, the difference was visible across all five areas assessed in the study. This suggests that the value of the

intervention was not restricted to one particular feature of speaking. At the same time, the findings need to be read with some caution because the groups were formed according to their initial speaking scores rather than through random assignment.

5.1 Storytelling and Overall Oral Linguistic Performance

The experimental group moved from a mean of **8.83** at pretest to **10.92** at posttest, giving a gain of **2.09 points**. The control group also improved, from **12.45** to **13.62**, but its gain was smaller at **1.17 points**. The difference is particularly noteworthy because the experimental group started below the control group.

One possible explanation comes from Swain's (1985, 2005) Output Hypothesis. Storytelling requires learners to do something with language. They have to decide what to say, retrieve words, build sentences, and keep the story moving. This is different from responding to a series of short, unrelated questions. The learner has a message to communicate and has to keep working with the language while doing so.

Task repetition may have added to this effect. The intervention did not ask learners to perform the same type of speaking task at the same level throughout the five weeks. They moved from supported activities towards more spontaneous production. As learners became familiar with the basic demands of storytelling, some of the attention that was initially needed to organise the task may have been available for language production itself. This interpretation is consistent with the work of Bygate (2001) and Bygate et al. (2001).

The findings should not, however, be presented as proof that storytelling alone caused the improvement. The experimental group and control group were not equivalent at the outset. Although ANCOVA showed a significant group difference after pretest performance was taken into account, the criterion-based allocation means that other differences between the learners cannot be ruled out.

5.2 Sentence Flow

Sentence flow showed one of the clearest differences between the groups. The experimental group gained **1.82 points**, compared with **0.54** in the control group. The adjusted group difference was significant, $F(1, 62) = 18.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$.

There is a straightforward reason why storytelling might have helped here. A story gives learners something to organise. They know that one event needs to connect with another, and that characters, actions, and events have to be introduced in some order. The learner is not starting from an empty space each time a sentence has to be produced. The narrative itself provides a framework for the speech.

This connects with Bruner's (1986, 1990) view of narrative as a way of organising experience and meaning. It also fits with work on task structure and repeated performance by Bygate (2001) and Skehan (1998). In the present study, learners repeatedly worked within a narrative structure, which may have made it easier to maintain the flow of their speech as the intervention progressed.

5.3 Spontaneity

Spontaneity also improved more in the experimental group. Its gain was **1.67 points**, compared with **0.47** for the control group. The adjusted group difference was significant, $F(1, 62) = 16.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$.

The sequence of activities is relevant here. Learners did not begin with completely unsupported speaking. They first worked with story frames and guided retelling. Later, they moved into instant storytelling and role-play, where there was less time to prepare. This gradual change may have given learners a chance to become familiar with speaking demands before they were expected to respond more quickly.

This finding fits reasonably well with task-repetition research. Bygate et al. (2001) argue that familiarity with task demands can free learners to give more attention to language production. What seems relevant here is therefore not storytelling in isolation, but the way the storytelling tasks were

arranged. A story may provide the content, but the repeated movement from supported to less-supported production may be equally important.

5.4 Pauses and Fillers

The experimental group showed a gain of **1.58 points** in pauses and fillers, compared with **0.39** for the control group. The adjusted difference was significant, $F(1, 62) = 14.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$.

This result needs a little care in interpretation. Pauses are not automatically a sign of weak speaking. Speakers pause while planning ideas, searching for words, and managing what they want to say. Fillers can also occur naturally in spontaneous speech. Segalowitz (2010) therefore treats fluency as more than simply speaking without pauses. It involves the cognitive and performance processes involved in producing speech.

In this study, pauses and fillers were considered as part of observable speech performance. The improvement may indicate that learners became better able to maintain continuity while managing the demands of spontaneous narrative production. It would be too strong, however, to claim that the intervention eliminated hesitation or produced completely fluent speech.

5.5 Confidence and Expressiveness

The largest gain appeared in **confidence and expressiveness**. The experimental group increased by **1.91 points**, whereas the control group increased by **0.61 points**. The ANCOVA showed a significant group difference, $F(1, 62) = 20.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$.

Storytelling gives learners a reason to keep speaking. Instead of producing isolated answers, they are communicating events, characters, actions, and sometimes emotions. That difference may matter for delivery. When learners have a story to tell, they have something to communicate beyond the grammatical or lexical item being practised.

This interpretation is broadly compatible with Huang's (2023) work connecting digital storytelling with speaking proficiency and willingness to communicate.

There is an important qualification, though. The confidence dimension in this study was based on **observable speaking behaviour**. It did not measure learners' psychological confidence directly. The result should therefore be understood as improvement in delivery and expressive performance, not as proof that the intervention changed learners' underlying self-confidence.

5.6 Vocabulary Use

Vocabulary use showed a gain of **1.46 points** in the experimental group, compared with **0.42** in the control group. The adjusted group difference was significant, $F(1, 62) = 12.67$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$.

One reason for this improvement may be the context in which vocabulary was used. During storytelling, learners had to select words that fitted particular people, places, actions, and events. They were therefore working with vocabulary as part of a message rather than only recalling individual words.

This is consistent with earlier work on narrative-based vocabulary learning (Akram et al., 2025; Gutierrez Arvizu, 2020; Kirsch, 2016). The present finding adds an oral-performance dimension to that discussion. Vocabulary practice was embedded in speaking, so lexical development and oral production were occurring within the same activity rather than as two completely separate classroom tasks.

5.7 Why Storytelling May Have Supported Oral Development

Taken together, the five dimensions point towards a common feature of the intervention: learners were repeatedly required to **produce connected speech with a meaningful purpose**. The story gave them content to organise. The speaking task required them to turn that content into language. Repetition then gave them opportunities to do something similar again, often with less support.

This provides a plausible connection with Swain's (1985, 2005) Output Hypothesis. Learners had to formulate messages and draw on whatever linguistic resources were available to them. At the same time, the narrative structure may have

reduced some of the burden involved in deciding what to say next.

The progression of the intervention also matters. Storytelling was not presented as a single activity that learners completed once. Supported production was followed by more independent forms of speaking. This is consistent with the task-repetition perspective proposed by Bygate (2001) and Bygate et al. (2001), where increasing familiarity with task demands may allow learners to handle oral production more effectively.

This may explain why the changes were spread across all five dimensions. The intervention repeatedly brought together organisation of speech, lexical retrieval, delivery, hesitation management, and spontaneous production. Its contribution may therefore lie less in the story itself than in what learners were required to do with the story.

5.8 Contribution to ELT Research

The study adds to the storytelling literature in a few specific ways. First, it examines storytelling-based instruction with higher-education ESL learners. Second, it looks at oral performance through five observable dimensions rather than reducing speaking to one overall score. Third, it compares the storytelling group with a regular-instruction group while taking baseline performance into account.

This broader view is useful because improvement in speaking does not necessarily occur in exactly the same way across all dimensions. A learner may speak more continuously without necessarily becoming more expressive, for example. Examining the dimensions separately makes these differences visible.

The findings do not suggest that storytelling should replace other approaches to speaking instruction. A more reasonable interpretation is that structured storytelling offers one way of giving learners sustained opportunities to organise and produce spoken language.

5.9 Methodological Interpretation

The findings need to be considered within the limits of the research design. The participants were assigned to the two groups according to their

baseline speaking performance rather than through random allocation. The control group also began with a higher mean score.

ANCOVA reduced some of the concern about the initial difference by including the pretest score in the analysis. It does not, however, make the design equivalent to a randomized experiment. Other differences between the learners may have contributed to the observed pattern.

The most appropriate conclusion is therefore that storytelling-based instruction was associated with greater improvement in the oral performance measures assessed in this study. The findings provide useful evidence for the approach, but they should not be presented as definitive proof that storytelling alone produced the gains. Stronger causal evidence would require random assignment or a comparable design with stronger control over potential confounding factors. Future studies could also use larger samples, independent raters, and longer follow-up periods

6. Pedagogical Implications

The findings offer some practical directions for teachers working with undergraduate ESL learners. The main point is not that every speaking lesson needs to become a storytelling lesson. Rather, the results suggest that storytelling can be useful when it is planned as a sequence of speaking activities and when learners are given repeated chances to produce language.

6.1 Storytelling as Structured Speaking Practice

Storytelling may be more useful when it is treated as a regular part of speaking practice rather than as an occasional activity. In the present intervention, learners moved from supported tasks to activities that required more independent speaking. A similar progression can be used in the classroom. Teachers might begin with a simple story frame or a sequence of pictures and then move towards retelling, role-play, and short improvised stories.

The amount of support can be adjusted according to learners' needs. Learners who need more guidance can work with prompts and story sequences at first. These supports can then be

reduced as they become more comfortable organising and expressing their ideas.

6.2 Bringing Vocabulary into Speaking

The vocabulary finding also has a practical implication. Vocabulary does not always have to be taught separately from speaking. A teacher can introduce a small group of useful words and then give learners a reason to use those words in a story.

For instance, words related to travel, daily activities, people, or places can become part of a narrative task. Learners then have to choose and use the words while communicating a message. This gives vocabulary practice a purpose and places lexical use within connected speech.

6.3 Creating Space for Spontaneous Speaking

The improvement in spontaneity suggests that learners need opportunities to speak without preparing every sentence in advance. Short narrative activities can be useful for this.

A teacher might show a picture and give learners a short preparation period before asking them to create a story. Other possibilities include changing the ending of a familiar story, continuing a story from a given point, or asking learners to tell a short story from a series of unrelated images.

The important part is not the particular activity. Learners need regular opportunities to formulate language while speaking, rather than relying entirely on rehearsed responses.

6.4 Providing Support for Learners with Lower Initial Performance

The initial assessment showed differences in learners' oral performance. This suggests that a single level of speaking support may not work equally well for everyone.

Story frames, visual sequences, key vocabulary, and guiding questions can give less confident speakers a starting point. Once learners can manage the basic structure of a narrative, some of this support can be removed. The aim is not to make the task easier permanently. It is to give learners enough support to begin speaking and then gradually ask them to take more responsibility for the language they produce.

6.5 Looking at More Than One Aspect of Speaking

The findings also point to a practical issue in speaking assessment. An overall speaking score can show whether a learner has improved, but it does not always show where the improvement has occurred.

Teachers can therefore consider several observable features when assessing oral performance. In the present study, these included sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use. Looking at these features separately can help identify a learner's particular strengths and areas that still need attention.

For example, a learner may speak with better flow but continue to rely heavily on fillers. Another may use a wider range of vocabulary but still need support with spontaneous production. A more differentiated assessment makes such differences easier to notice.

6.6 Using Storytelling as Part of, not a Replacement for, Speaking Instruction

The findings should not be taken to mean that storytelling should replace other forms of speaking instruction. Its usefulness may lie in the opportunities it creates for learners to organise ideas, retrieve language, and sustain speech over a longer stretch of communication.

Storytelling can therefore sit alongside other speaking activities such as discussions, presentations, role-plays, pair work, and task-based interaction. Its strongest contribution may come when it is used consistently and when activities are sequenced so that learners gradually move from supported narration towards more independent oral production.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings need to be considered in relation to the conditions under which the study was conducted. The study involved 65 ESL learners from one higher-education context. This provides useful evidence for the learners who participated, but the same pattern may not necessarily occur in other institutions or with learners from different backgrounds and proficiency levels. The findings

should therefore be interpreted cautiously when considering other contexts.

The way the groups were formed is another limitation. Learners were classified according to their baseline speaking performance rather than randomly assigned to the two conditions. ANCOVA was used to account for the initial difference, but statistical adjustment cannot rule out every possible difference between the groups. The findings therefore indicate an association between the storytelling-based instruction and the observed improvement, rather than providing conclusive evidence of a causal effect.

The five-week intervention also limits what can be said about longer-term development. The posttest showed change following the instructional period, but the study does not establish whether that change would remain over a substantially longer period. A longer intervention with follow-up assessments would provide a clearer picture of the durability of the gains.

Assessment is another area that could be strengthened. The study used a researcher-developed analytic rubric covering five dimensions of oral performance. This provided a consistent framework for the present analysis, but future studies could involve multiple independent raters and report inter-rater reliability. This would strengthen confidence in the scoring of observable speaking behaviours.

Future research could also broaden the comparison. The present study compared storytelling-based instruction with regular classroom instruction. A useful next step would be to compare storytelling directly with another established communicative speaking approach. Such a design would help determine whether the observed advantages are specific to storytelling or reflect the broader value of increased opportunities for oral production.

The role of learner proficiency also deserves closer attention. The learners in the present study did not begin at exactly the same level of speaking performance. Future studies could examine whether storytelling produces similar outcomes among lower-, intermediate-, and higher-proficiency learners. This may help identify the

learners for whom particular types of narrative support are most useful.

Finally, future research could examine whether the improvement observed in structured speaking tasks transfers to less-supported communication, such as spontaneous discussions, presentations, interviews, or academic speaking. This would be particularly valuable because improvement on a researcher-developed assessment does not automatically mean that the same improvement will appear in everyday or academic communication.

Overall, the present findings provide promising evidence for structured storytelling-based speaking instruction, but they also point to questions that cannot be answered by the current design. Larger samples, longer interventions, stronger control conditions, multiple raters, and transfer measures would provide a more complete picture of the role storytelling can play in ESL oral development.

8. Conclusion

This study examined whether structured storytelling-based instruction could improve the oral performance of higher-education ESL learners. The experimental group increased from a mean of 8.83 in the pretest to 10.92 in the posttest, a gain of 2.09 points. The control group also improved, but its gain was smaller, increasing from 12.45 to 13.62.

The initial difference between the groups makes the adjusted analysis particularly important. After pretest performance was taken into account, the ANCOVA showed a significant group effect, $F(1, 62) = 16.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$. The same general pattern appeared across the five assessed dimensions. Sentence flow, spontaneity, pauses and fillers, confidence and expressiveness, and vocabulary use all showed significant adjusted group differences.

The findings point to something broader than an increase in the overall speaking score. Learners in the storytelling group improved across several observable features of oral production. They had to organise events, find words to express those events, maintain the flow of a story, and continue speaking even when production was not fully

prepared. The repeated nature of these activities may have given learners more opportunities to work through the demands of speaking.

The strongest dimension-level effect was found for confidence and expressiveness ($\eta^2 = .25$), while vocabulary use showed the smallest effect ($\eta^2 = .17$). These differences are useful because they suggest that the intervention may not have affected every aspect of speaking to exactly the same degree.

The conclusion must nevertheless remain cautious. The learners were not randomly assigned to the two groups, and the control group began with a higher level of performance. Although ANCOVA accounted for pretest performance, other differences between the groups cannot be completely ruled out. The findings therefore provide evidence of a significant association between the storytelling-based intervention and improved oral performance, rather than definitive proof that storytelling alone produced the gains.

Within these boundaries, the study supports the use of structured storytelling as a component of higher-education ESL speaking instruction. Its value appears to come from the way storytelling creates a reason to speak, while the progression of activities gives learners repeated opportunities to organise, formulate, and reformulate their ideas. The study also reinforces the usefulness of examining oral performance through several observable dimensions instead of relying only on a single overall score. Future research with larger samples, stronger group matching or random assignment, longer interventions, independent raters, and follow-up assessment can establish whether these gains are sustained and whether they transfer to less-supported forms of communication.

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